RESEARCH

Mobile Flight: Refugees and the Importance of Cell Phones

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This article presents results from in-depth interviews with 18 newly arrived refugees in 2016, focusing on their usage of cell phones underway to Europe. The (anonymous) informants are from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. Relating to previous findings and theories of globalisation and media ecology, the research concludes that the phone is used for a wide range of purposes, such as *connectivity* (with family, friends and potential helpers), *en route companionship* (not least when travelling alone), *solidarity* (helping each other, finding better routes and lending phones and chargers), *governability* (ways in which to tackle authorities) and finally, that refugees, during their weeks underway, acquire important skills contributing to their *transnational media literacy*. Furthermore, the interviews show the relevance of modern cell phone technology as an important part of media ecology for people on the move in precarious situations.

1 Introduction

> On a negatively globalized planet, security cannot be obtained, let alone assured, within just one country or in a selected group of countries: not by their own means alone, and not independently of what happens in the rest of the world. Neither can justice, that preliminary condition of lasting peace, be so attained, let alone guaranteed.
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> Zygmunt Bauman: *Liquid Times* (2007: 7)

People are increasingly on the move. The war in Syria has forced millions of people to leave the country. Almost 40 years of war and conflict in Afghanistan continue to drive people into exile, as do oppressive regimes and armed conflicts in Eritrea, Iraq, Somalia and elsewhere. Refugees are on the move, through areas where they are both vulnerable to persecution from authorities and at risk due to reckless smugglers and profiteers.

This article explores the experiences of 18 asylum seekers' usage of cell phones on their way to Norway. It includes individuals from three countries and four language groups, who arrived as part of the increased migration to Europe in 2015. Refugees are at times assumed

to be poor so that anti-refugee groups claim "that refugees should not even have smart-phones" (Literat 2017: 2). In contrast, this research shows that refugees have various social backgrounds, and that while travelling, cell phones represent their most important posses-sion providing them with an array of life-important functions.

The main research question for this research is: *What roles does the cell phone play for refugees during their travel to Europe?* Sub-questions are: (1) in which situations has the cell phone been of particularly vital importance? (2) to what extent is the cell phone used for communication to family and friends? (3) to what extent is the cell phone used for other endeavours? The findings indicate that the cell phone – be it a modern smartphone or a sim-ple cell phone – plays a very important role as a "fellow traveller", taking care of communica-tions with people left behind, as a travel guide including contact with smugglers and other actors facilitating the flight, and as a useful assistant in precarious, unforeseen situations.

The concept *cell phone* is deliberately used as an overarching category, as not all informants were in possession of smartphones.[1] As for the informants, I mostly use the concept *refugee* or *asylum seeker*, and not *migrant*, as this is how they name themselves. In addition, judicially, they were all asylum seekers at the time of interviews. The informants' countries of origin are Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, all countries ravaged by prolonged war.

The article, after briefly presenting the Norwegian context, outlines a theoretical frame-work and related studies on cell phone usage and presents the methodology of this study, that is in-depth interviews with asylum seekers. Next, it groups the findings into four sub-categories. First, how cell phones were used as a source of human protection; second, the phone as a communication tool to family and friends; third, its role in facilitating access to news and other information; and fourth a number of other ways of using phones while the refugees were navigating their way northwards.

1.1 Context 2015: refugees to Norway

As a result of the worsening of the war in Syria and the prolonged wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, an unprecedentedly large number of refugees – more than one million people – arrived in Europe in the autumn of 2015. Almost 30,000 of them came to Norway, and the largest groups were Syrians (10,267), Afghans (6,625) and Iraqis (2,921), followed by Eritreans and Iranians (UDI 2016).

However, the European nation-states and the EU largely responded by enacting more restrictive migration policies by closing borders and applying other measures trying to discourage refugees from embarking on journeys to Europe (Human Rights Watch 2016; Afghan Analysts Network 2016; EASO 2016). In some media, arguments were raised against asylum seekers, which assumed that these people were economically privileged because of their possession of modern cell phones (see for example Kaggestad in *Drammens Tidende,* 13 November 2015).

2 Cell phones, the global and the "nowhere-land"

Movement, in the sense of physical mobility, is characteristic of contemporary globalisation (Eriksen 2007: 92). In the past few years, the number of refugees has reached new proportions, and the flight itself has become increasingly imbued with fear and distress. An important aspect of migration is border control. "The national borders of rich countries are increas-ingly becoming militarized" (Eriksen 2007: 95), and the refugees are subject to "a curious mix of humanitarianism and military action emanating from Europe in the Mediterranean" (Eriksen 2016: 76). These developments represent challenges to people in flight, and in the past 10–15 years, they have increasingly used modern electronic devices such as smartphones to meet these challenges.

Refugees, according to Bauman, find themselves in "a cross-fire; more exactly, in a double bind" (Bauman 2007: 44). "They do not *change* places; they *lose* their place on earth and are catapulted into a nowhere, into Auge's 'non-lieux' or Garreau's 'nowherevilles', or loaded into Michel Foucault's 'Narrenschiffen'" (ibid: 45).

This nowhere-land – as we may also call it – requires navigation skills to avoid horrors and achieve relative safety. Nicholas Harney, in his research on mobile phone usage among asylum seekers, refugees and migrants in Naples, writes that migrants in Naples "operate […] within the precariousness of the Neapolitan social and economic field, outside the structures of society that might alleviate or mitigate the uncertainties of contemporary capitalism and the political structures that maintain it" (2013: 2–3). In other words, the precarious situation of not-belonging or indeed loss of place does not end with arrival or settlement in Europe. Harney writes about how street hawkers use their cell phones to communicate the dangers of police inspection in-between their groups so that the hawkers can swiftly pack their stuff and vanish from their market place.

2.1 Media ecology and the importance of phones

Modern communication may be of some emotional comfort for people in distress: it is good to ascertain that your folks at home worry less if you keep them informed of your current situation. Moreover, the cell phone represents a logistic device to facilitate a stressful and dangerous journey. Thus, it plays a crucial role in today's ecology of communication (Altheide 2013); it provides organisation (of travel, togetherness), accessibility of information (when connection and charging devices are available) and contributes to structuring of sorts, of the whole flight.

Cell phones, and particularly the smartphone versions, may be viewed as part of an "interplay among social activities, social change, and social organization and activities" or the "structure, organization, and accessibility of information technology, various forums, media, and channels of information" (Altheide 2013: 226). According to Altheide's elaboration of the theory of mediation, media logic "reflexively shapes interaction process, routines and institutional orders; everyday life and institutional orders reflect and reify a communication order operating within media logic" (ibid: 225).

Cell phones, as a means of communication in situations of flight, have proven to guide refugees' everyday and non-routine extraordinary activities (e.g. finding the way, escaping danger and securing financial supplies); in short, they prove to be an indispensable travel companion.

The particular ways in which *underway* refugees are using cell phones have emerged as a topic of media research (Gillespie et al. 2016; Gillespie, Osseiran & Cheesman 2018; Kaufmann 2016a, 2016b; Zijlstra & van Liempt 2017), while, earlier, more investigation was carried out into the communication practices of settled refugees and migrant labourers who work far from home (Harney 2011; Fresnosa-Flot 2009; Madianou 2014; Murphy & Priebe 2011), that is, to preserve family contact through ICT.[2] This also applies to refugees and migrants not living within the Western hemisphere, as demonstrated in the case of Sri Lankan Tamils exiled to India, where a study concludes that the phone communication helped to reduce social distance and bring families closer, and that it "not only crosses borders, but [is] perhaps one that keeps borders from closing" (Sreenivasan, Bien-Aimé & Connonny-Ahern 2017: 98). A recent study of adolescents in a juvenile centre in Spain also underlines these functions, adding that young migrants play the role of "the successful migrant in Europe" in their digital contacts (Perez & Salgado 2019: 16).

The increasingly cheaper communication technology has, for many years, facilitated global connections. As Vertovec wrote:

> Every day cheap international telephone calls account for one of the main sources of connection among a multiplicity of global social networks. For many of today's migrants, transnational connectivity through cheap telephone calls is at the heart of their lives. (2004: 223)

More than 10 years later, technology offers several new dimensions. Thus it makes sense to speak of the "connected migrant" within a "culture of bonds" (Diminescu 2008) and of the cell phone as "polymedia" (Madianou 2014). In addition, sophisticated surveillance mechanisms have been revealed, not least through the "Snowden affair" (Greenwald 2014; Harding 2014). For example, for Syrian refugees living in Jordan's largest refugee camp, surveillance by the state is one of their experiences of information precariousness, since refugees who have lived under an authoritarian regime could be in danger or "detained for receiving calls from outside the country" (Wall, Campbell & Janbek 2015: 11). The general feature of increased "govern-mentality" (Loh 2016), a system to which refugees are subjected to management both in camps, during travel and oftentimes upon their arrival (and sometimes not in the wished-for country), is a matter of concern for many and includes the fear of being forced to deliver fin-gerprints before they reach their final country of destination.

Harney concludes that although authorities may increasingly use cell phones in surveil-lance systems to localise and expel refugees, those who live in this state of uncertainty may experience reduced fear and anxiety from cell phone communication. One example is Ahmed who says he can "text my brother in London any time I am lonely" (Harney 2011: 13). This kind of communication is vital to migrants and their sense of security and well-being.

Of course, most refugees in Europe use their cell phones in different ways for "staying in touch with friends and family, but they are even more essential for refugees en route" (Gillespie et al. 2016: 11). This is a two-way process: those who are in flight are constantly worrying about those who are left behind, especially those who live with war; and those who have not left worry about their relatives' perilous border crossings.

Gillespie et al. also suggest that "the 'smartphone-wielding refugee' [...] encapsulates a deep ambivalence in the coverage of 'smartphones and refugees' – a vital tool for refugees and also a potential threat for European citizens due to its power to mobilise refugees" (Gillespie et al. 2016: 9) and refer to the terror attacks in Paris 2015 as an event rendering the smart-phone as a "terrorist essential" instead of a "refugee essential" in some media reports (ibid.). In another study (Gillespie et al. 2018), the benefits (planning, navigation, contact with family and friends and smuggler contacts) as well as the harms of having a smartphone "co-traveller" (surveillance and border control) are emphasised. Their informants were all in France, a coun-try that has experienced several serious terror attacks. This may partly explain why their harm focus is stronger than was found in this research, where informants focus more on the posi-tive functions of smartphones. Furthermore, their (Gillespie et al. 2016) research seems more action-oriented, aiming at providing information resources for refugees underway, while this study remains exploratory.

3 Focus and methodology
The project is based on face-to-face in-depth interviews conducted with newly arrived refu-gees to Norway during the spring of 2016; all meetings were held in temporary asylum cen-tres.[3] Many were still waiting for the authorities to interview them; others were waiting for approval of residency – or rejection. Several of the interviewees were accompanied by small children.

The asylum seekers interviewed (*N* = 18) all arrived in Norway in 2015.[4] Their identities were made anonymous, and interviews were conducted by a team proficient in the mother

tongues of Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.[5] The selection differs from other related studies, such as Gillespie et al. (2016, 2018) and Kaufmann (2016b), which focus more on Syrians and do not include Afghans. However, one particular ethnographic study, interviewing refugees in transit, does include Afghans (Zijlstra & van Liempt 2017). Because of the low level of literacy and digital infrastructure in Afghanistan, we may have observed a considerable variation of technological proficiency more than in most other studies. As our focus was on refugees who had recently journeyed to Europe (through the most usual routes for refugees, i.e. the Eastern route[6]), those who, for example, had resided for a long time in Russia and arrived through the Northern border between Norway and Russia were excluded. Some refugees got rid of their phones, and while they did not directly mention it, it might be correlated with a fear of having one's movements traced; an experience confirmed by Gillespie et al. (2016).

The majority ($N = 12$) of the 18 interviewees were male. This reflected the gender ratio of new arrivals. The research team consisted of this author (female), one post-graduate working as a freelance journalist (male) and one undergraduate student of political science (male). The two men had origins in Kurdistan and Afghanistan, respectively. Because one team member was female, we have managed to access female informants more successfully than other projects have. Two of the three team members had refugee backgrounds, and their ICT proficiency as well as their experiences from having travelled the hard way to Europe represented an invaluable source of information while planning and conducting the research interviews. Our joint experiences also made it easier to contact individuals and create an atmosphere of trust necessary for the realisation of each encounter. We conducted interviews in Arabic, Dari, English, French and Kurdish.

The interviews usually lasted between one and three hours. Some were also videotaped, with full consent from the interviewees, and a small video presentation was made when our joint book was launched in 2017.[7] In addition, thorough notes were taken. All participants who wished for this, were granted full anonymity, and some information details have been slightly altered to avoid the identification of participants. Most informants had time to spare since they were jobless and spent long hours sitting idle in the asylum centres. The authorities at the centres had no objection to us being there.

The team discussed and devised a set of questions for an interview guide, listing possible areas of cell phone usage. Those questions were asked and supplemented by other follow-up questions. However, during encounters with the refugees, we soon realised that they were interested in conveying more full stories about their travels, as some of them found the focus on cell phones limiting. They wanted to represent themselves with wider stories, as individuals, each with unique experiences. Although the interviews treated a diversity of issues (often issues that occurred spontaneously), the research is still considered as *media studies.* Most of the refugees did have modern smartphones, but some used older Nokia models, an indication of material poverty combined with lower degrees of techno-literacy.

An overarching perspective in this research has been to consider the ICT usage as part of human- and individual-oriented narratives emerging since the larger influx of refugees started in 2015.

The interviewees shed light on the wide range of purposes for which the cell phones were used, in a situation of liquidity. Some situations show how the cell phones were used after these refuge-seekers arrived in Norway, illustrating the fact that some of the same cell phone features, essential while *en route*, are still needed.

4 Results: mobile phones as a multi-function device

Security, safe passage and communication with family members who have remained behind in the homeland and with people who have travelled before them top the list of urgent

cell phone usage. The flight routes run across rough waters, offering risky opportunities for refugees, at times also for smugglers. The refugees try hard to find border areas that are still open. And in-between facing all these challenges, they collect memories from the long dramatic days they have lived through. Below is an overview based on the stories told by the 18 interviewees.

4.1 Protection and safety

Ekram[8] lived in Syria with his family of five, but his wife and the two youngest children were killed in a bomb attack. Like many others seeking refuge, he travelled the sea route between the Izmir area in Turkey and one of the nearby Greek islands. The cost of such a journey range from 700 to 1,200 USD for an adult depending on season, while the cost of the ferry is a handful of dollars. While they were at sea, the old engine broke down, and one of the refugees used the GPS on his cell phone to find out how far they were from their destination. The signal told them that they were rather close. The smugglers had not provided the boat with oars, so the refugees who were able paddled with their hands. Ekram says that the waves were high. He had to comfort his little son as they "were confronted with death". They used clothes to try to empty the interior of the boat, since it lay low and was almost filled with water. He and other informants confirm that most would carry their cell phones in waterproof bags around their necks, which illustrates the point that they consider the cell phone as the most valuable possession. Moreover, as confirmed by other studies, "most rescue operations are initiated by migrants using their mobile phones" and migrant deaths "occur in areas with no mobile phone coverage" (Gillespie et al. 2016: 10).

Walid tells how, while in transit, he was contacted by his friends in Syria who wanted information on the smuggler routes. "They were worried since many had died on the way to Europe drowning in the sea". His wife was pregnant and had various complications; thus, the phone was used to map ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) bases along the route. "We received a lot of assistance from the Red Cross", he adds.

Ekram and his co-travellers were rescued by Greek fishermen who gave them warm clothes, and later they were able to take another boat to Samos. He shows a cell phone picture of his son, now happy and safe on board the big boat. While in the small boat, nobody took pictures. They travelled mostly by night, and a flash of light might have revealed their boat to the Turkish authorities. When near the Greek islands, the cell phone could be used to alert the more benevolent Greek coast guards.

Hamida arrived with an elderly family member in a larger wooden boat, less dangerous than the small rubber boats. Yet, it was not so easy for untrained boat people to find the way. One of the fellow passengers had GPS on his phone and thus, they found out that they were only approximately 20 minutes away from the nearest Greek island. As they neared the Greek shores, these passengers pulled out their cell phones and took selfies and pictures of the island.

Mina tells how the smugglers offered them a boat they had to steer themselves, with a defective motor. The waves were high, and as the boat was taking in water, all passengers had to throw their luggage overboard, including in her case, the cell phone. For the rest of her travel, she borrowed phones from fellow travellers to inform people at home about the fate of the family and their journey through Europe. "The most important thing now is that we live and are well, but I miss all the photos in the cell phone, earlier pictures of the family and the children", she adds.

Jamil tells how he used his phone actively when crossing to Iran from Afghanistan. His smuggler contacts, in particular, used their phones actively to avoid Iranian police. One smuggler would be some distance ahead, communicating with another, who walked behind the

group. "Without your phone, you could be caught anywhere", he says. His phone was damaged by water during the boat trip from Turkey. However, his wife had her phone wrapped up in more layers of protective cloth, so that it remained intact.

Ekram also tells how useful the phone was in the frequent police encounters: "The policemen are more careful if you show that you want to film [an encounter]. I could hold the cell phone in front of them and ask: "What do you say?" In one case, this rescued him from having to give his fingerprints. This finding is also confirmed by Gillespie et al., who found that cell phone cameras are "used for 'citizen witnessing' of violence and harassment by authorities, smugglers and combat forces, including Islamic State militants" (2016: 9).

Furthermore, Ekram confirms that they could warn other refugees en route about the whereabouts of the police, and what they might expect from them. Among the warnings were instructions on how to avoid being registered as asylum seekers in countries where one did not want domicile.

Hamida told how her group, after having reached a remote place on a Greek island, had to walk for almost 10 hours. They still had Turkish SIM cards. At a mountaintop, one of the refugees received Turkish signals and was able to find a way to the nearest town.

Some informants had lost or disposed of their phones while travelling, presumably because they feared being traced. Most interviewees had used WhatsApp, hoping to secure unmonitored communication with smugglers, family and with co-travellers.

4.2 Reassuring family: selfies on the shore

"The first thing I did [after having arrived at this town] was to purchase a new SIM card", Hamida explains. "Then I could call my father in Afghanistan: Now I am at the other side of the ocean! He was very happy, since he had heard of the problems with coming from Turkey to Greece".

Most informants used their phones to assure their families and friends of their safe arrival as soon as they had reached Europe. Some would send pictures from Greek islands, selfies and landscapes, demonstrating at times a chaotic situation. This is part of what Kaufmann calls "doing family" (2016a), as she characterises the journey as "an extreme psychological burden" where worries of the family's situation add to the refugees' own situation. "Keeping in touch with family during the trip [is] crucial for mental health" (ibid). Our informants confirm this vital need for updates. However, the "selfies on the shore" have also received negative attention:

> These images of refugees taking selfies – and, significantly, not the selfies themselves
> – have been published in various media outlets, from Time Magazine to the Daily Mail
> and the Daily Mirror. Following their publication online, the images are then picked
> up and circulated via social media […] where they are fodder for further discussion and,
> most often, outrage. (Literat 2017: 2)

However, Gillespie et al. in their monitoring of news coverage found that news stories of the smartphone as a "refugee essential" also occur (2016: 23). Literat comments on social media attacks on selfies as "a way of disciplining refugees' bodies" (2017: 2) and claims that for the refugees they represent bearing witness and documenting their presence. Besides, selfies taken from marginalised people who manage to own a cell phone en route may also represent empowerment (Rettberg 2014), especially in precarious situations. Mansur, who arrived in Norway with his young brother and pregnant wife, confirms the importance of documenting one's presence: "The first thing I did after arriving in Greece, was to call my mother and tell her. […] I sent pictures to the whole family at home". They sent them through Facebook

and WhatsApp, and Mansur and his wife confirm how happy they were, being able to use the phone to reduce the anxieties of their relatives.

4.3 Keeping family together

A chaotic situation continues for some separated family members in the country of arrival. Karim and his small family are separated by almost 300 km from his young nephew, who is disabled and in his mid-teens, as well as from his brother with whom he fled from Syria, but who now lives even further away in another part of Norway. They find cell phones vital to stay in touch. Most asylum centres have free Wi-Fi, which is of great importance to refugees. Karim and his wife use WhatsApp to stay in touch with his relatives, and particularly with this nephew. "I do not know why we cannot be together", says Karim. At the time of the interview, it was hard for him to travel for two reasons. First, in financial terms, the subsistence sum granted to asylum seekers is kept at a minimum; second, in logistical terms, his wife was expecting a child.

A couple from Syria, Hassan and Rehan, who had sent two of their four children with other relatives, now suffered the consequences. These children were still in Germany, with no short term prospects of moving to Norway. In such a situation, the cell phone provided an invaluable source of contact through Skype or WhatsApp. "My children swap pictures with each other. They need to see each other", says Rehan; "the children want to look at the phone all the time".

In addition to the memories of first arrivals, our informants talk about the need to create positive memories from their travels. In the midst of chaos, there was also human assistance, not least for refugee children. Ekram shows a video from his cell phone where a volunteer in Serbia plays ball with his four-year-old son, who is beaming with joy. Having lost the rest of his family, his archive of memories (including several videos and many pictures, both from the journey and from their stay in Lebanon) will help his son remember his origins and his past.

4.4 Home – far away

A study of the communication practices of young migrants or children of migrants in Oslo, Norway, reveals that the informants use their cell phones both to access social media and to read news both from the country left behind and from their country of domicile (Eide et al. 2014). As will be demonstrated below, in precarious situations, refugees may reduce their news searches due to more urgent needs. For some individuals fleeing war, the news is too painful. In addition, the extent to which they can prioritise such surfing activities depends on the amount of battery power, a constant worry for many refugees.

Mansur sometimes used the cell phone to receive news from Syria through Facebook and a special website. Zerin also accesses Facebook for this purpose, but adds another website. At the centre where Mansur and Zerin lived at the time of the interviews, they only had access to three Norwegian TV channels. However, through the Internet, they could access the Kurdish TV channel *Rudaw*. "The phone is like a fellow being, like a friend," says Mansur. This "friend" has since been used in Norway to document the celebration of Nowruz (21 March, the new year in Kurdistan, Iran and Afghanistan). Mansur showed a video where he sings beautifully at this function, surrounded by fellow Kurds settled in Norway. This may be seen as an instance of "doing home" and preserving traditions abroad, while simultaneously integrating with settled refugees from home. Zerin, also from the Kurdish areas in Syria, says they would at times access news from Al-Jazeera or Al Arabiya but also sites offering Kurdish music.

Ekram did not want to search for news from home while he was in transit. "I am responsible for a small child. I needed to calm down, if I look at the news, I am reminded of dead people.

They remind me of when I had to bury my two other children. Yes, I know there is still war in Syria, but there are certain things I do not want to remember".

Rahim had a very traumatic journey from Afghanistan, especially through Iran, and was travelling from his home to Norway for more than two months. Despite the hardships, he used the phone mainly to send optimistic messages home, and he found relief from some of his distress by listening to the song of famous singer Ahmad Zahir "The World's chest is too narrow for my sorrows".

Atiq did not bring much from Afghanistan when he undertook his journey. He had some money and a cell phone that was wrapped in four layers of plastic. Most of the time, he kept it hidden in his underwear. Although carrying a minimum of luggage, his phone embodied important cultural capital, as it contained riches from Afghan culture: music, video clips, films and many books. In addition, he had stored copies of his documents, like several others.

Atiq's funds ended in Athens, where he bought a Greek SIM card to call home and had to sleep for three days in a park while waiting for a transfer of € 1,000. During the long stretches of flight, it is not recommendable to travel with large sums of cash. Zerin and other informants stated that they received money through cell phone communication, so as to be able to continue their travel. Otherwise, they would have been stranded. As refugees, they must expect extra expenses; the fare for the boat ride does not include life jackets, so an extra sum needs to be found for these. The costs arising en route may put extra strain on family and friends staying behind; this underlines the family's need for reassurance of success.

4.5 Navigation, solidarity and entertainment

Mansur used the cell phone to find the smartest routes, and which buses and trains to use. Zerin adds: "We also used it to find more information about the asylum policy in different countries. Underway, we also created a Facebook group to exchange information about travel routes. My brother also took part in this group. But he is in another country now." Another vital function was their contact with smugglers, all of whom operate several phones and websites, both to investigate the safest and best options, and to negotiate the price of a variety of boat rides.

4.5.1 Navigation Apps

For many, the preferred communication applications were WhatsApp and Viber, but also Facebook Messenger. Since Atiq had a rather sophisticated cell phone with an extra battery, he oftentimes lent it to friends. Moreover, he used the phone to communicate with friends through Viber to find his way to Turkey through Iran. He says that he did not need this function in Europe because the Red Cross helped him. He still keeps in touch with friends he met on the way, individuals who are now seeking asylum in other countries.

Most interviewees have had to contact smugglers on their way to Europe, especially when crossing the Aegean Sea to the Greek islands. These "agents" use Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to place ads for their variety of services, such as false documents and full transport "packages" with equally varying prices. In these "ads", they also show pictures of satisfied people who have reached Europe due to their assistance (Eide, Ismaeli & Senatorzade 2017). The interviewees' narratives include tales of exorbitant prices and brutal treatment.

4.5.2 Solidarity

A perpetual problem was charging the phones – and changing SIM cards for every new country they passed through. "A plane ride from Syria to Europe takes four hours. We used 20 days", says Mansur. The refugees oftentimes borrowed phones or SIM cards from each other if they were temporarily out of money and their phones had no battery power. Mansur used the

phone only for the most important calls, such as informing those at home when he and his family had arrived in Greece. Many others had to borrow his phone when their batteries were low, since charging places were rare. At one stage, he travelled in a group where 11 members were dependent on one cell phone. Such and similar narratives demonstrate the solidarity of sharing. Karim had a charger capable of supporting up to four cell phones at a time. "When you are travelling like this, we all become like brothers", says Payam from Afghanistan. Thus, the phones not only connected people through apps and calls but also through lending and sharing whenever the needs arose.

"As we came to help stations, we were always asked whether we were hungry, says Hamida. "I used to say that I was not very hungry, but my phone was hungry!" This corresponds with Kaufmann's findings indicating that electricity is more important than food for some refugees: "Without nutrition we can proceed for one or two days, but without electricity or without Smartphone it becomes difficult" (Kaufmann 2016b: 329).

The travellers often used Google translator to understand various signs and texts they encountered when entering new countries. Others had a harder task. Payam is illiterate. When being lost, he used his basic phone to call a friend to "find out where I was". He then used some English phrases to contact local individuals, for example at a railway station, so that they could tell his friends over the phone where he was. Thus, by phone help and guidance, he was able to continue his journey. Even though he did not have a phone with advanced technology, his basic phone had one advantage: "The battery lasted much longer".

Sharing was not always friction-free, however. Shirin, having arrived with her son and nephew, said that at the asylum centre, they would sometimes quarrel over the one cell phone at their disposal, as the boys wanted to watch the matches of their respective favourite Champions' League football teams.

4.5.3 Entertainment/culture

Some of the buses boarded by refugees would have Wi-Fi, but they had to pay extra for access, according to Bilal. On some trains, however, it was free. Some informants report using their phones for gaming, but most did not, for fear of losing battery power. Coming from rural Afghanistan, Bilal tells us that he has one game – Farm heroes – installed on his mobile, and that he has played this game in the bus at times. Hassan and Rehan, travelling with children, told that they would sometimes let them play a particular game to calm down.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

Cell phones are "seen as a vital tool by transnational populations such as refugees, potentially enabling social and economic networks to remain strong, be repaired, or develop anew" (Wall et al. 2015: 13). But as this and other studies show, the phones have a wide range of other usages, and they vary with political experiences from the homeland, with socioeconomic status or cultural capital, as well as circumstances underway to Europe.

Our main research question in this exploratory research was: *what roles does the cell phone play for refugees during their travel to Europe?* The diversity of functions are summarised in the following paragraph. The study has documented situations of danger/fear, when the phone has been of particularly vital importance (sub-question 1). Furthermore, most interviewees use the phones to stay in close contact with family members and to ease their worries (sub-question 2). Finally, the phones were used for a number of other purposes, but the usage was somewhat restricted en route due to concerns regarding battery power (sub-question 3).

According to Bauman, asylum seekers and migrants "epitomize the unfathomable 'space of flows' where the roots of present-day precariousness of the human condition are sunk" (Bauman 2007: 48). Throughout our encounters with the new arrivals from the Middle East

and beyond, we sensed this precariousness in three stages. First, the situation determining the decision to leave (war and threats); second, the fears of never reaching the destination, not least due to perilous border crossings and ocean transportation, where many said they really feared for their lives; and, last but not least, the fear of not being accepted – judicially and socially – wherever they have arrived. The cell phone may help to alleviate these fearful situations at least in the first phase, by using the phone as a navigator to find advice, smugglers and/or co-travellers, and in the second phase, to escape or reduce danger. In the third phase, the phone practices have more to do with "doing family" (Kaufmann, 2016) by staying in contact with family members elsewhere, and by seeking information in their country of arrival, where they hope to settle and adapt.

Part of adaptation and positive development of identities are linked to recognition, to experience acceptance and a new sense of belonging. The cell phone may play a role as a navigation tool in such a development. Moreover, it can also remind travellers of a lost past through its storage of family pictures, homeland music and other cultural links.

Kaufmann (2016a, 2016b, 2018) compares the phone metaphorically to a (similarly multipurpose) "Swiss Army knife" and mentions the following important points: coping as a refugee under flight, doing family (staying in contact), drawing strength and keeping memories alive and also making sense of subsequent refugee processes in which they become involved.

Myra Georgiou highlights the following cell phone functions during flight: "lifeline, information resource, memory carrier, witnessing mechanism and companion",[9] although she also mentions "luxury, toy, and tool of withdrawal" (Georgiou 2016). The first part of her list matches our findings. When refugees are settled or at least stay in less precarious places, the usage repertoire will become wider ("luxury, toy"), as witnessed by one informant filming the "Nowruz" celebration among Kurds in Norway, and by two others who could once again pursue their interest in the UK's Champions' League.

In a row of different "underway situations", the cell phone, especially the smart version, is a helpful companion and at times a vital tool for survival. On the basis of this research, the functions of cell phones to people on the way to Europe may be summarised as follows: connectivity, companionship, solidarity, governability and, finally, transnational media literacy.

5.1 Connectivity

The interviewees reveal various degrees of technical proficiency, from very advanced usage to those who just use the phone for communication with family, friends and other helpers en route. They also confirm the function of *belonging* or *anchoring* due to the intensive contact with the countries left behind, although some, due to traumatic experiences, do not want to look back. The connectivity also includes contact with smugglers and individuals who can offer financial assistance.

5.2 Companionship

For some refugees, the phone becomes impersonalised, as a friend and a helper, both in life or death situations, and when seeking to improve the travel conditions or navigate through various maps and apps to find a better route; or indeed checking the options for asylum in European countries.

5.3 Solidarity

Several informants tell stories of sharing, lending and borrowing each other's phones and charging devices. Issuing warnings and advice to fellow travellers are an important part of this solidarity. Saved images also show how volunteers help out at stations underway, not least by assisting to create moments of leisure for children.

5.4 Governability

Altheide, in his discussion of media logic and mediation, mentions how smartphones and social media "and the surveillance applications of each of these" increase the risk of "mediated social control as well as promotion of fear" (Altheide 2013: 225). Most refugees originate in countries with oppressive regimes and thereby have experienced fear of (digital) persecution. They are aware of the Schengen system and the Dublin convention, through which a refugee is obliged to stay in the first (Schengen) country of registration. Being tracked by way of possessing and using a cell phone is a concern for some, who want to make sure they reach their preferred destination. Therefore, they may get rid of these digital "companions" and/or purchase new ones. Others talk about using phones against authorities to avoid registration or mistreatment.

5.5 Transnational media literacy

During flight preparations, and during the flight itself, the refugees acquire digital skills, which are useful and necessary for travelling (more) safely. Yet, modern cell phones also offer a way of bringing memories and heritage along, as the young Afghan who downloaded much music and literature from his home country, as a way to feel less alone when entering new and unknown territories. Such collections, in addition to documentation en route, are also a way tracking one's own life and identity and are facilitated by the multi-functions of videos, stills, soundbites, *Facebook* and *Instagram* updates, the latter applications providing an archive even if the phone itself is lost. Translation devices, border crossing, learning to cope with police and NGO cultures underway, all contribute to an upgrade of what may be called refugees' transnational (media) literacy (Spivak and Sanders 2006; Eide, 2009), and not least, the techno-literacy needed to make full usage of the phone potential.

Notes

[1] As for the presumed expensive phones, informants tell us that cheaper pirate copies are available in the countries they traverse, such as, for example, Turkey.

[2] Information and Communication Technology.

[3] For research questions, see above.

[4] Seven are from Syria, six from Afghanistan and five from Iraq.

[5] The team has worked together on most interviews, which were conducted in Dari, Pashto, Arabic, Kurdish and French. This author has transcribed the majority of them, and the other members helped interviewees and translators as contact persons. The article stems from a larger project, which also generated a popularized book, where all three of us are co-authors.

[6] The Eastern routes represent flight through Turkey, crossing Greek islands or the Greek mainland, entailing crossing either the sea or a river, and then travelling through several European states.

[7] The videotaping was made (with consent from part of our population) for a later potential production. If this production is completed, the interviewees will be asked again for consent, and only those who have obtained asylum will be included.

[8] All informants have been given pseudonyms.

[9] See presentation at https://ec.europa.eu/research/conferences/2016/migration-challenge/pdf/migration_conf-m_georgiou.pdf. Accessed 13-07-2016.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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