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Empowering experiences of digitally mediated flows of information for connected migrants on the move

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ABSTRACT

Together with their precarious access to basic rights, Syrian refugees and other temporary migrants also face information precarity, a condition of information instability and insecurity. Although there is a growing literature parallel to the increase in the number of refugees and other temporary migrants, the extent to which digital communication helps them to cope with this kind of precarity still needs to be discussed. From this standpoint, in this paper, I discuss the role of information and communication technologies in the transnational lives of those migrants in Turkey while they are on the move, through the theoretical framework of connected migrants and how the digital space of flows accommodates affordances to overcome information precarity. Empirical findings reveal that use of information and communication technologies, e.g. smartphones and social media, not only provide migrants with transnational connections but also become a strategic tool for survival, especially for refugees and asylum seekers. Most migrants maintain transnational social bonds, either through phone calls or social media. Diasporic connections through social media and existing social capital in Turkey assist migrants to meet various needs.

KEYWORDS

Information precarity; temporary migrants; connected migrants; digital space of flows; empowerment

Introduction

The summer of 2015 was identified by large numbers of refugees mobilising towards Europe, and above all, deadly incidents during extensive sea crossings in the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas. During the passage of the refugees, a two-sided debate immediately began. On the one side of the debate were the closure of borders, the erection of walls, and the digital control of all this, while on the other, the modes of communication that empower refugees on the move to navigate, connect and survive. This two-sided debate of digital technologies as apparatuses for migrants' empowerment versus states' institutional control, which is largely discussed by Nedelcu and Soysüren (2020) in the introductory article of this special issue, is precipitated by information flows and networks of interaction. In this article, in order to map the trans-border connectivities and organisational practices of temporary migrants[1] within transnational networks, I recontextualise the digital space of information flows that embodies the cross-border circulation of

knowledge, tools, skills and interactions that those migrants practice in their everyday experiences to gain empowerment and participate in the political domain.

Yet, as Kivisto (2003, 15–16) indicates, 'communication technologies do not determine how they are used; rather, the uses of technology are ultimately socially defined. Thus, it is important to explore not simply access to communications technologies, but also the ways different groups employ them'. According to Kivisto, this meaning of being connected will govern the motivations and actions of migrants.

Following Kivisto, it is possible to say that not only the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) – like smartphones, the Internet and social networking sites – but also being connected itself have an essential value among migrants and refugees within the context of transnational migration. Its essential value is recognised in how it supports access to the fragmented and limited information resources available to refugees and asylum seekers scattered throughout spaces. Therefore, by looking at these temporary migrants' daily practices in unstable conditions, spaces and times, I argue that digital space of flows offers opportunities for temporary migrants and refugees (1) to overcome information precarity; (2) to strengthen transnational ties; (3) to increase their social and cultural capital; and (4) to engage in political action and mobilisation, especially the uncertainty of their stay threatens their well-being. I further discuss how the everyday digital engagements of temporary migrants are socially and politically defined.

The main research question is when and in what ways ICTs are useful leading up to and during mobility. And what are the limitations that migrants experience in using ICTs? To this end, in the first section, this article discusses how the conceptualisation of connected migrants is operationalised in light of recent literature. Before detailing the findings of the study, the migratory context of Turkey is outlined, along with the methodology of this study. Drawing from literature on digital communication and migration, I then explore the use and impact of smartphone technologies and digital tools among temporary migrants in Turkey. I specifically discuss the importance of the use of ICTs by people on the move and its use in fostering both transnational and local ties. Then I lay out my empirical analysis across notions of connected migrants to politicisation and mobilisation.

Mapping the conceptual framework

There is a growing number of studies that discuss how communication technologies are being used by migrants and, more recently, refugees. Communication practices, information and communication technologies and digital media have also been examined as a means of studying diaspora (Kissau and Hunger 2010) and social ties. Diaspora involves transnational activities (Georgiou 2005, 2006) as tools for political action and mobilisation (Kissau 2012) or, more recently, those transnational activities may become an everyday practice by migrants and refugees (Walker et al. 2014; Leurs 2017; Smets 2017; Nedelcu and Soysüren 2020).

Digital space of flows allows us to describe the digital media use of migrants and of nonmigrants as a field of practice. This means migrants are not only connected (Diminescu 2008) through polymedia (Madianou and Miller 2012), but also the meaning of digital media use is constructed through a complex relationship of migrants, non-migrants and

the networks that they are a part of. Interaction of different actors within both the digital and non-digital realm enables migrants to act upon the information gathered through digital media. Thus, the field includes a series of actions from survival and accessing basic needs to transnational connections, and even to political action within the context of temporality of mobility.

Digital space of flows and overcoming information precarity

In their essay, Leurs and Smets (2018) present a detailed review of a new scholarship, what they call 'digital migration studies', as an emerging field of research on the intersection of digital communication and migration studies by reflecting upon the main conceptual, methodological and ethical challenges. Within this perspective, they refer to the seminal conceptualisation of 'connected migrants' coined by Dana Diminescu (2008). According to her, the 'environment of [a] connected migrant is strongly marked by communication, access and storage technologies' (Diminescu 2008, 576). By employing the connected migrant framework, Leurs and Ponzanesi (2018, 5), following the work of Diminescu, underline the epistemological shift 'from the notion of migrants being uprooted and separated from their home toward a connective presence'.

In their study on Syrian refugees' access to social media information prior to and during their migration, often through the use of smartphones, Dekker et al. (2018) even stretch the conceptual framework by coining the term 'smart refugees'. They use it not only to refer to smartphones, 'but also to what asylum migrants gain from using this device: information and communication resources that are essential for developing "smart" strategies of migration' (Dekker et al. 2018, 9). Moreover, Kevin Smets (2017), employs the concept of 'connected refugees' in order to understand the nonmedia-centric and local approach of Syrian refugees' use of media in Turkey. Following the 'connected refugees' framework, I utilise the recent literature on communication technology and migrants, with a specific focus on transnational ties, political mobilisations, and the precarious conditions of everyday practices of refugees, asylum seekers and transit migrants.

Along with their everyday precarious conditions, refugees, asylum seekers, and transit migrants are faced with 'information precarity'. Wall, Campbell, and Janbek (2017, 1) define this notion as 'the condition of instability that refugees experience in accessing news and personal information, potentially leaving them vulnerable to misinformation, stereotyping, and rumors that can affect their economic and social capital'. In their research at the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, Wall, Campbell, and Janbek (2017, 2019) focus on the refugees' use of cell phones to overcome information precarity.

Similarly, Harney (2013) examines smartphone use among refugees and asylum seekers in the Naples region to consider how this technology enables them to mitigate or resolve precarious everyday working life conditions through an increased sense of security and well-being. Smartphone use by Syrian refugees in recent crises has also garnered attention by both news media and scholarly work (e.g. Maitland and Xu 2015; Smets 2017; Leurs 2017; Alencar, Kondova, and Ribbens 2018; Gillespie, Osseiran, and Cheeseman 2018). In these works, it becomes clear that communication rights are as fundamental as other rights, including access to accommodation, health, education and/or the labour

market. Furthermore, for refugees social media becomes a vital tool to reach smugglers and brokers during their flight (Frouws et al. 2016; Latonero and Kift 2018).

Transnational connections facilitated through ICTs

Since migrants face tremendous social, political and economic challenges in their everyday experiences, they rely heavily on digital media, social networking sites and their smartphones to increase their social and cultural capital and learn about their new homes. For those who have been forced to migrate, communication technologies enable them to engage with new spaces and possible new destinations. Gillespie et al. (2016, 12), in their extensive study on digital media journeys of Syrian refugees toward Europe, emphasise that the smartphone 'could be a tool that helps them navigate their journeys through European systems, institutions, culture, language and way of life'.

There is a substantial literature on migrants who engage in transnational networks and relationships across borders by accessing satellite television, diasporic radio broadcasting and news making, while also using the Internet for peer-to-peer daily conversation, etc. Previous studies have already pointed to both conventional and digital media's potential to strengthen transnational ties across borders, practices of migrants and of non-migrants in different geographical contexts, and to accumulate social remittances (e.g. Vertovec 2009; Faist 2010; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011; Georgiou 2006; Nedelcu 2012; Lim, Bork-Hüffer, and Yeoh 2016; Lim and Pham 2016). The framework of transnationalism facilitates the analysis of communication practices that transcend national borders. As an example from the forced migration literature, in their study of Tamil refugees in Indian camps, Sreenivasan, Bien-Aimé, and Connolly-Ahern (2017) examine how smartphones function to connect the homeland and refugees by pulling down cultural, psychological, and physical borders.

Digital networks for migrant politicisation

Refugees and migrants increasingly use digital technologies to engage in political action and mobilisation as well. In some cases, the use of a digital tool itself becomes political action. As DaPonte (2015, 28) points out, 'some refugees use blogs and social media channels to publish content banned at home to try to fight the repression they escaped'.

Transnational social movements, whether they are at a national or local level, profoundly rely on ICTs. As Langman (2005, 43) asserted, 'technologies of communication have been integral moments of modern social mobilizations'. While earlier social movements depended on the printing press, telegraph, radio, and even television, contemporary social mobilisations also utilise new media, such as the Internet, smartphones and other digital media (Şanlıer Yüksel and Yüksel, 2011).

In regard to grassroots movements, Bennett (2005, also 2003a, 2003b) distinguishes between what he calls first-generation NGO advocacy networks and second-generation direct activism networks. According to Bennett, second-generation activism adopts technologies that facilitate greater autonomy and leaderless networks, providing political capacities by embracing various communication channels. Bennett (2003a) further argues that digital media have had a significant impact on the changing dynamics of transnational activism:

> The new media make loosely structured networks crucial for communication and coordination among activists; weaken the identification of local activists with the movement as a whole by allowing greater scope for the introduction of local, regional, and national issues into movement discourse; reduce the influence of ideology on personal involvement in social movements; diminish the relative importance of bounded, durable, resource-rich local and national organizations as bases of social movement activism; increase the strategic advantages of resource-poor organizations within social movements; promote the creation of permanent campaigns with rapidly shifting immediate targets; and combine face-to-face performances with virtual performances. (Şanlıer Yüksel and Yüksel 2011, 245)

Digital media and social networking sites also provide capacities to mobilise fragmented groups, such as migrants and refugees, and enhance political mobilisation across borders (Kissau 2012; Oiarzabal and Reip 2012; van der Brug, D'Amato, and Ruedin 2015; Leurs and Ponzanesi 2018). As Leurs and Smets (2018, 11) rightfully assert, digital communication networks have equipped migrant communities and refugee groups that are scattered in host countries 'with new political opportunities and mobilizing structures'. Similarly, according to Kissau (2012), the Internet may be used for political purposes and generates cyber-activism among migrant groups in terms of national, transnational and diasporic construction. In many cases, digital activism serves as a passage from micro/digital to mass media. For example, Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti (2013) argue that Syrian diaspora activists employ digital communication strategies through social media to link the voices of protesters inside Syria to the outside world and to get mainstream media attention, both in their host countries and on a global level. Yet, transnational social movements that rely on ICTs seem to have weaknesses in decision-making, control, and collective identity. While acknowledging the capacity of digital media for rapid and extensive mobilisation, Tilly (2004) argues that digitally networked protest actions do not necessarily evolve into collective action and may not create unified and sustained social movements.

Although the recent literature on connected migrants and refugees, as described above in detail, have theoretically and empirically been applied to different categories of transnational migration, it still needs to be elaborated through empirical work on current dynamics across various contexts. The case of Turkey represents a critical research site where contextual variety (e.g. in the politico-legal or socio-economic dimension) can be observed for different categories of migrants such as refugees, asylum seekers and transit migrants. These manifold characteristics of migration dynamics in Turkey allow me to investigate various functions that digital media enable for those who connect themselves to the world beyond where they are located and while they are on the move.

Migratory characteristics of Turkey

In addition to its transit characteristic, Turkey hosts more than 4 million migrants, including Syrian refugees (most of whom are under temporary protection status in Turkey), Afghan, Iraqi or Iranian asylum seekers, and Uzbek or Filipino low skilled labour migrants, as well as highly skilled migrants, lifestyle migrants predominantly from European countries who mostly settle in the coastal regions of Turkey, and tertiary level students in relatively smaller numbers.

Since the early 1980s, Turkey has become a major country of asylum. Regime change in Iran in 1979, followed by the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War of 1990–1991, the subsequent political turmoil in Iraq and the U.S. invasion contributed to asylum flows to Turkey. Turkey is a signatory of the 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 Additional Protocol on the status of refugees, yet still retains the geographical limitations that grant refugee status only to those coming from Europe. Therefore until September 2018, asylum applications by non-Europeans in Turkey were processed by the UNHCR in order to resettle asylum seekers to a safe third country. Since September 2018, the Directorate General of Migration Management, an institution established in 2014, has been solely responsible for registering and processing international protection applications. The Turkish legal system offers limited protection to non-European refugees by granting them 'conditional refugee' status.

Besides the mass influxes mentioned above, Turkey received approximately 5000–6000 asylum applications per year on personal bases from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. Since 2007, there has been a considerable increase in the number of asylum seekers arriving annually in Turkey. This increase has been especially remarkable since 2011, rising from 18 thousand to 112 thousand in 2017. Triggered by the Arab Spring in the MENA region that led to the exodus of thousands of people to Southern Europe, the political crisis and civil war in Syria has led to a mass immigration flow towards Turkey, along with other neighbouring countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, since 2011. Turkey initially declared an 'open door' policy and hosted the Syrians in refugee camps in the region bordering Syria.

Notwithstanding, the camps almost immediately exceeded their capacity due to the prolonged flow of Syrian refugees, forcing them to disperse across Turkey, particularly to cities near the Syrian border and eventually to larger urban settings, for example, Izmir and Istanbul, where they could find a job and make a living. The Turkish government originally called them 'guests' because of the lack of legal provisions and expected refugees' stay would be temporary. However, the protracted nature of their stay and lack of legal status threatened their fundamental right to access basic needs. The sudden increase in the Syrian population in Turkey, along with the unpredictable nature of the situation in Syria, has led to rising challenges of assistance, especially regarding housing and health services, as well as the politicisation of the migration issue in Turkey. Consequently, their status was changed to 'temporary protection' in October 2014.

Both conditional protection and temporary protection statuses safeguard the refugees' and asylum seekers' non-refoulement rights but do not offer permanent residency rights, which forces them to eventually seek asylum outside of Turkey. As Turkey became host to with high numbers of refugees, asylum seekers, and transit migrants, without providing permanent protection of rights, many of those who were trapped in severe conditions started to look for new homes and headed to Europe en masse in the summer of 2015. The irregular passing of migrants resulted in an agreement signed between the EU and Turkey on 18 March 2016. This agreement aimed to address the overwhelming flow of smuggled migrants and asylum seekers travelling across the Aegean Sea from Turkey to the Greek islands by allowing Greece to return to Turkey 'all new irregular migrants' that arrived. Unfortunately, the agreement has left refugees and asylum seekers more deprived and

vulnerable. An ever increasing number of Syrian refugees – 3.60 million as of June 2020 (DGMM 2020) – combined with an estimated nearly 1.5 million regular and irregular migrants who are not Syrian and reside in the country, are proof that Turkey has now become an immigration and a transit country.

Limited access to rights and precarious conditions are embedded within the temporary nature of mobility for transit migrants and asylum seekers, as well as within the temporary protection status for Syrian refugees. Forced migration is widely studied in the context of Turkey, but few studies look at digital practices and ICTs. They mainly focus on one particular function, namely the use of ICTs for smuggling (Zijlstra and van Liempt 2017; Frouws et al. 2016), rather than providing an analytical connection across various uses of ICTs. So, uncertain conditions and the protracted flow of forced migrants to Turkey and from Turkey into Europe need to be explored in a range of dimensions, including within everyday digitally connected practices.

Methodology

The data discussed in this article is collected as part of a larger research project titled 'Transnational Migration in Transition: Transformative Characteristics of Temporary Mobility of People (EURA-NET)'. The findings discussed in this article are not one of the main axes of the research project mentioned. It is a grounded phenomenon that came out of observations and in-depth interviews conducted throughout the research process. The power and potential of this grounded method that stems from a structured research is in its contribution to excavate implicit phenomena even though they are not searched at the beginning. Data analysed in this article is based on in-depth interviews with 25 temporary migrants as well as ethnographic observations. Interviews were conducted mainly in Istanbul, but also in İzmir and Eskişehir, during the spring and summer of 2015. During my fieldwork, the Basmane district in İzmir became one of the central transit points for those trying to reach Europe via the Greek islands. Along with the thousands of refugees, mostly Syrians, scattered around the district and waiting for refuge, the most shocking image was that of orange life vests being sold in regular shops. The Aksaray district in Istanbul was similar to Basmane, as it hosts the largest migrant communities in Turkey. However, Eskişehir, a mid-sized city, became important for the sake of my research because of its status as satellite city and its accommodation of asylum seekers from Middle Eastern and African countries.

Among the interviewed temporary migrants in Turkey, thirteen were asylum seekers, three were transit migrants, one had refugee status, and eight had temporary protection status. Table 1 displays the nationalities, gender and number of respondents according to each migration category. I use the category of asylum seekers for those who have applied for asylum in the UNHCR system and are waiting to be granted refugee status. The refugee category is used for those who are granted that status by UNHCR and are waiting to be resettled in a third country. Syrian refugees are categorised under temporary protection status, according to Turkish legislation.

Table 1. Distribution of interviewees.

Migrant category	Nationality	Gender	Total
Transit migrants	Congo (2) Iran (1)	Female (2) / Male (1)	3
Asylum seekers	Iraq (6), Iran (3), Syria (1), Afghanistan (3)	Female (4) / Male (9)	13
Temporary Protection Status	Syria (8)	Female (2) / Male (6)	8
Refugees	Congo (1)	Male (1)	1
Total		Female (8) / Male (17)	25

I conducted interviews with nine respondents from Syria. In Table 1, they are categorised according to their legal statuses. One of them is an asylum seeker who was able to apply to UNHCR and eight of them are categorised as migrants under temporary protection status. The sample includes respondents from different ethnic (Arab, Circassian, and Kurdish) and religious (Muslim and Christian) backgrounds.

The age profiles of migrants varied from 16 to 57. Regarding the country of origin, most of the respondents came from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Congo. The duration of stay in Turkey among the respondents varied from 2 months to 8 years. The interviews were conducted in Turkish, English, Arabic and Farsi. In this paper, all participants' names are pseudonyms to protect anonymity and confidentiality. They did not much differ from each other in terms of access to ICT-mediated communication tools. All had smartphones and use Internet on a regular basis. In order to analyse the empirical data collected from interviews and field notes, I used NVivo, a widely used qualitative data analysis software. The coding scheme included three major themes: (1) migration processes, (2) politico-legal aspects of refuge, and (3) the socio-cultural dimension of using information and communication technologies by refugees, asylum seekers, and transit migrants.

Being connected during refuge and accessing reliable information

Since the ongoing civil war in Syria started in 2011, Turkey has been faced with a protracted flow of refugees from Syria along with the inflow of other humanitarian migrants from Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. Until the Law on Foreigners and International Protection came into force in April 2014, and an ordinance was published by the General Directorate of Migration Management in October of the same year, Syrian refugees were accepted as guests without being granted a proper status. The new law provided them temporary protection status, which allows limited rights regarding access to health care, education, and other social services as well as the labour market. Due to the ambiguous and shifting legal and administrative policies towards Syrians in Turkey (Şanlıer Yüksel and İçduygu, 2018), many respondents were uncertain about their future in the country. Darwish (temporary protection, 1961, Syria), for example, explained his life in Turkey in three words: 'Exploitation, racism and poverty. I have nothing else to lose but my life.'

Smartphones are the major tools helping refugees be connected to the rest of the world and at the same time have a significant impact on refugees' destinies. For instance, Fimi (female, 1987), a Congolese migrant who is in transit in Turkey waiting to be settled in a third country, checked her phone every two to three minutes during the whole interview. When I asked her whether she is expecting a call, she replied 'Yes!' The phone represents a means to escape uncertainty:

> They will call from the UNHCR for the interview date. I wait all the time. I sleep with the phone and I am so afraid to miss that phone call. If I miss [it] I will be stuck here. (Fimi, female, transit, 1987, Congo)

Social media sites, such as Facebook, become safe spaces for refugees and transit migrants – especially when they are on the move – by connecting them to their families and extended kin networks, providing reliable information from trusted network members, facilitating interactions with fellow members of the host society and 'also by actively transform[ing] the nature of these networks and thereby facilitat[ing] migration' (Dekker and Engbersen 2014, 401). Some of the participants from Syria mentioned that they resort to social media in migration decision-making processes.

> We decided to come to Turkey because we read on Facebook that Turkey's Circassians would host us. KAFFED [Federation of Caucasian Associations] would help us. We didn't know the details of the association; we read on the Internet. They put all the information on social media. (Marwa, female, temporary protection status, 1985, Syria)

The year 2015 was marked by large numbers of refugees mobilising towards Europe, extensive sea crossings, and more than anything, deadly incidents in the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas. When I arrived in Basmane, one of the central districts in İzmir, migrants – regular, irregular and those who were seeking refuge – were scattered around the small parks and streets. They were waiting to meet smugglers and brokers to buy passage on an overcrowded rubber boat to a Greek island. It was a place where they got support from the local communities and NGOs as well. The tense wait created its own economy, with boarding houses and new hotels for accommodation, newly opened cafes and grocery stores for food, and a visible market of smartphones for communication and navigation. Wi-Fi access and smartphones seemed to be one of the major concerns for refugees as they waited to make the crossing.

Refugees en route used smartphones to navigate their journeys, access practical information and documentation, and keep in contact with smugglers during their journey. Some of the refugees I met were using a newly introduced mobile site for orientation before they left Turkey. The website was built by a partnership of the International Rescue Committee, Google and Mercy Corps to provide refugees access to vital up-todate and location-specific information and resources: where to reach medical facilities; how to find refugee camps and accommodation; transportation options; maps for necessary locations; and humanitarian services in various languages including Arabic, Pashto, Farsi, Greek and English. The site also informs refugees about registration processes and their rights and responsibilities as a refugee in Europe.

During my fieldwork, I was following hashtags such as #lesvos, #refugeecrisis, and #boats on Twitter. Along with other social networking sites, Twitter provided information about safe and unsafe routes and served as an instant reporting tool on landing boats and rescue operations initiated by volunteers and NGOs. By communicating through those hashtags, NGOs and activist groups made good use of the social networking functions of digital technologies for the sake of refugees' survival and security. According to participants, these activists and their work created an impression of hope for those who sought refuge:

> We do not have a future here. Neither the UN nor Turkey recognise us. We Afghans have to choose this deadly path towards Greece since we cannot get a status here. Some die, you know. But there are good people in the islands, we hear about them. Not the authorities; regular people like you and me. They track the boats and greet the newcomers to help. So I am not thinking of risking my life, [but] I'm thinking about starting a new life in a new safe home. (Nader, male, asylum seeker, 1958, Afghanistan)

Some of the online resources and applications are developed and produced by refugees. When one of my participants in Eskişehir, Nadir (male, 1984, Syria), showed me his phone screen, an interface in Arabic grabbed my attention. Nadir translated and explained the name of the application: 'It means exile, being lonely without anybody familiar. Contrary to its name, the app connects me to Turkey. I get help in finding jobs for example. I also learned about the Turkish legal system.'

On the European side, an example from Germany of particular significance was mentioned by one of the participants as crossings to Europe heightened in autumn 2015. The Refugees Welcome initiative and its website serve as a hub for refugees in finding accommodation, such as home sharing with local communities, as well as collecting and distributing donations. Through the website, European citizens from about 20 countries register to share their flats with refugees in order to provide new homes and better integration.

Although refugees and asylum seekers rely on Internet sources to access reliable information and cope with information precarity, they are faced with mis- and disinformation and exposed to rumours as well. In Basmane, some of the refugees told me that they are waiting for 'the ship sent by German Chancellor Merkel'. The rumour of this ship was spread among refugees at an accelerated speed through communication channels. Smugglers and brokers also use social networking sites to recruit those who try to seek refuge in Turkey or travel further to Europe. This exposes refugees to further danger and illegality, deepening their insecure conditions.

> There are ads of smugglers on Facebook in Farsi. How much it costs, which routes one should take, which cities one should locate himself in Turkey. Fake rental contracts, information about transformation, any kind of information you need. You can find on Internet. (Amir, male, asylum seeker, 1975, Iraq)

To some extent, digital space is characterised by an abundance of information, especially when sporadic and/or unreliable data are considered. Thus, in such cases discussed above migrants do not always distinguish and make use of ample information to be able to overcome their unsecure conditions.

Digital space and social practices at transnational and local levels

As transnational migration literature indicates, everyday interactions between migrants and non-migrants are sustained through media and communication technologies (Faist, Fauser, and Reisenauer 2013; Baldassar et al. 2016; Nedelcu and Wyss 2016). In accordance with scholarly work, all participants of my research maintained transnational social bonds either through phone calls or social media use. Especially for refugees en route, instant communication was important in order to provide information on their

whereabouts, health conditions, etc. Most of the participants, regardless of their statuses, mentioned the daily use of applications such as Skype and WhatsApp to maintain contact with their family members and friends left behind.

> I am in touch with family members back in Iraq. We talk over the phone. But the Internet is cheaper. I use WhatsApp or Viber applications. I am always in contact with them. They have concerns about Turkey's conditions, that's why we talk more. (Hakim, male, asylum seeker, 1986, Iraq)

Simultaneously, transit migrants mentioned the importance of the everyday use of digital communication with other migrants who settled in a third country. These interactions seem to directly encourage migrants' aspirations and decisions to move further.

> I talk with my friend in Canada over Skype or Facebook. They tell me that they don't feel like a foreigner in Canada. Because everybody is a foreigner there. (Farhad, male, transit, 1985, Iran)

As discussed earlier, Facebook is another tool connecting migrants with their families and friends and one of the most important tools that assists Syrian refugees. Specifically, refugees with a Circassian background from Syria repeatedly mentioned that they have contacted their ancestral families/kin that they had not previously known through Facebook. Because they use their kin names in their accounts, a basic search helped them to connect with possible hosts in Turkey before they arrived. According to Akdeniz Göker (2019, 121) 'discovering the kinship ties via internet has proven to be an influential factor facilitating the grounds for solidarity bonds within the diasporic community'.

When one of the participants, Nadighe (b. 1999), a Syrian who is under temporary protection status, told his flight story, it became clear that transnational networks enable further mobility and solidarity within the network. Thus, information is most useful when involves personal connections. Nadighe, after crossing the border to Turkey and arriving at a town, immediately found an Internet café where he could use a connected computer. He contacted his family and informed them about the border crossing conditions. He then searched for people with the same kin/ancestral name on Facebook and contacted them. The family, who lives in Düzce – a small city in northern Turkey – replied to Nadighe immediately and hosted him along with others. Diasporic connections (e.g. Circassian-Syrians) and existing social capital in Turkey (e.g. family members of Iraqi refugees who had previously migrated) assist migrants to fulfil various needs such as finding a place to stay or to work. In this way, support is not only received but also provided by previous migrants.

During my fieldwork, participants discussed the temporary nature of their conditions in Turkey and aspirations to return to their home countries or continue to migrate to another country. Thus, their smartphones could serve as a tool that enables them to inquire into the cultures, institutions and way of life in the countries where they aspire to go. Digital media also helps them learn a new language, thus providing resources to accumulate social capital:

> I study German every day on the Internet when I don't go to work. Germany has announced to host sixty thousand refugees. I won't wait here in Turkey, I'll try to go via smuggling and I need to know German. (Farhad, male, transit, 1985, Iran)

In addition to its potential for transnational engagement, digital space provides opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers to interact with fellow members of the host community at the local level. But, of course, the information is only useful when it is in a language in which one can communicate. The language barrier is one of the major obstacles that migrants face in their daily social interactions. One useful tool that is available using smartphones is translation applications. These applications provide significant support, especially when medical or legal aid needed. For example, an application developed by refugees, is a comprehensive example that delivers voice translation for migrants in Turkey and text translation for text messages and documents. Translators are present around the clock, and applications are available in different languages including Arabic, English and Turkish. Most of the participants indicated that they use this application or similar others when in need.

As Smets (2017) underlined, the everyday consumption of popular media texts is a common practice among refugees. They regularly use smartphones and digital technologies to watch television programmes as well. Azaar (b. 1988), an Afghan asylum seeker, mentioned that he watches Turkish TV series, such as Kurtlar Vadisi, in order to connect with everyday culture in Turkey. In this way, he and others are able to realise a sense of togetherness and familiarity.

Political action through the digital space

Temporary status leaves migrants in more precarious conditions and makes them subject to stigmatisation. Participants discussed the obstacles in their social lives due to the perception of being a 'foreigner', e.g. renting an apartment, registering their children for school, finding jobs, and in bureaucratic processes. This pushes them to search for new homes and take action.

Although I observed very little direct political action by refugees in Turkey, one case is very important in terms of the politicisation of seeking refuge in relation to social media. In September 2015, thousands of Syrian refugees who wanted to cross to Greece via the land border were stopped by Turkish security forces at the main bus station in Istanbul and stayed there for about a week. After a week of misery at the bus station, the majority started to march to Edirne, a north-western city of Turkey at the border with Greece. They walked along the emergency lane and were again stopped by the police about 50 kilometres away from İstanbul. Meanwhile, hundreds of mostly Syrian refugees who were able to reach Edirne engaged in a roadside standoff for days. The whole march started through a Facebook page titled 'Crossing No More.' During the march, a social media campaign continued with the hashtags #Crossingnomore and #marchofhope, which turned into action and created a useful tool for mobilisation. On the other hand, the use of ICTs and an open digital space of flows also seem to foster an environment of fear in Europe. The moral panic seemed to be fuelled by the use of digital media and social networking sites by refugees, seen as 'a potential threat for European citizens due to its power to mobilize refugees' according to Gillespie et al. (2016).

My observations on the #Crossingnomore movement mostly support Bennett's (2003a) assertions regarding second-generation transnational activism. However, it was far from

being a pure type of second-generation direct activism network, since it was not a fully fledged, sustained social movement able to produce significant social and political change. As Georgiou (2018) points out, the presence of refugee and migrant voices does not necessarily guarantee recognition or influence.

Apart from direct political action, I observed refugees performing a variety of forms of participation online. In some cases, even political remittances transferred transnationally. For example, an Iranian asylum seeker, a young lawyer who escaped from Iran because of political persecution, continues to advocate for human rights issues in Iran through blogging, in what Kissau (2012) calls online political activism. While she protects her ties with her home country, she engages with Iran from Turkey through digital political action.

> I have a blog where I write my political opinion pieces. I continue to be a part of my country′s political life. And it supports my asylum case. (Bahar, female, asylum seeker, 1986, Iran)

Yet, Bahar was writing her blog using an alias. Her nightmare was being unmasked and located by Iranian intelligence through any digital traces she left behind. Her most important tool for politicisation has the potential to turn into a gun pointed towards her as a control and surveillance mechanism. Thus, she blogs intermittently.

Another online mobilisation method is crowdfunding. The Internet offers a variety of crowdfunding sites to collect financial resources to be spent for projects related to refugees. During my research, a unique site, MigFunder.com, was established as a crowdfunding platform for funding migrant start-ups, humanitarian initiatives, and research projects focusing on migrant and refugee communities. However, the website closed shortly after its launch.

Conclusion

Turkey became the largest recipient of refugees in 2015, four years after the beginning of war in Syria. People seeking refuge en masse and the fatal conditions accompanying use of the Eastern Mediterranean route exacerbated the precarious predicament of Syrian refugees and other transit migrants. Refugees are in dire need of basic rights such as accessing health, shelter, food, getting an education and opportunities to work, but also the rights and tools to communicate in order to overcome the impediments inherent in their precarious conditions. Thus, the physical space of human flows are interwoven with information getting/sharing and communication practices, forming a digital space of flows (Castells 1999) and connecting refugees (Diminescu 2008; Smets 2017). Although there is a growing literature on refugees, asylum seekers, and digital connectedness, most of the empirical works focus solely on the use of digital technologies, such as smartphones and social networking sites. In this article, I explain the role of information and communication technologies in the transnational lives of temporary migrants in Turkey and while they are on the move.

This article particularly draws on the experiences of 25 refugees, asylum seekers and transit migrants in the context of migration processes in Turkey. Methodologically, researching the use of ICTs by migrants in the most perilous and precarious categories in three different urban settings serves as a comparison to understand the practices introduced to overcome deplorable conditions. Conceptually, my emphasis for all intents and

purposes was not only on the ability to access to communication technologies but rather on how refugees and other migrants adapt these technologies in order to cope with their precarious conditions stem from temporariness, and how the digital space of flows makes the adaption possible by providing a field of contestation transcending border politics.

Focusing on migrants′ connectedness, the empirical section details how refugees engage in digital space. I discuss three main lines of findings of refugees, asylum seekers, and transit migrants′ everyday digital communication encounters from field research conducted in three different cities in Turkey. First, digital communication practices are an integral part of refugees′, asylum seekers′, and transit migrants′ lives, and offer opportunities to overcome the disadvantages caused by information precarity, especially while they are on the move. In the digital space of flows, not only migrants are connected, but it offers to migrants a transnational space that enables the use of existing social capital, provides the necessary resources to distinguish reliable information from the abundant mass. Second, while strengthening transnational familial ties, digital connections help refugees accumulate social and cultural capital. Also, when connections are based on latent kinship ties, people benefit from them more than they would from random / unreliable information. Here, digital means revitalise a latent social capital rather than being capital (information) itself. The digital space provides opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers to interact within the local context as well as transnationally. Lastly, there is a growing literature on migrant politicisation especially on the use of ICTs for resisting border regimes. But there are other ways of political use. In their everyday practices, refugees and other migrants engage in political action and mobilisation intermingled with online tools, juxtaposing diverse digital media practices of different migrant categories predicated on multiple motivations for actions and thus multiple meaning constructions. However, digital mobilisation does not necessarily mean sustained and organised mobilisation. One should be aware of structural constraints of organisation in and through digital space because of its inherent limitations for political encounters. So, the use of ICTs helps refugees create meaning from their experience in precariousness, if not always empowering them politically.

While the recent scholarship on ICTs and people on the move has begun to generate a great deal of conceptual and methodological discussion, my analysis of empirical data has contributed to the developing literature of temporary migrants′ use of those technologies in order to overcome precarious conditions caused by the very nature of temporariness. By revealing the possibilities those technologies may provide, I claim that the digital space of flows serves as a flexible sphere that responds to immediate needs and deep-rooted problems of migrants on the move.

I argue that digital media practices comprise several opportunities embedded by digital space of flows for refugees and other migrants, such as accessing reliable information, connecting with family members and others both translocally and transnationally, and mobilising politically. Thus, digital space of flows not only includes information flows but also social practices surrounding the communication and dissemination of information and serves as shelter to amplify refugees′ voices. The analysis into digital space of flows revealed that it is possible to ascend effective and creative communicative actions for migrants on the move. It became apparent from the interviews with some participants that,

following hearing of possible disclosure or threat, there was less concern regarding connections with the larger community. With their lives under threat, the possibility of collective action, for example, could be sacrificed for the more urgent goal of life security. Arguably, then, the reasons for the use of information technologies have less to do with the advent of highly mediatised environments than the conscious decisions by migrants to overcome the conditions imposed by the migration process itself. Less conclusive, however, is Latonero and Kift's (2018) claim that digital passages may serve to control and raise borders, thus leaving refugees and other migrants more vulnerable by contributing to the creation of both territorial and symbolic divides.

A study oriented on digital information and communication technologies carries the risk of getting stuck in a version of technological determinism. Multiple readings of various uses of that technology might draw us away from the threat of determinism. From this perspective, new questions such as how refugees socially define their use of technology and whether refugees' lives change through digital innovations and networking arise. To be able to answer to those questions, I argue that within the digital space of flows, migrants and refugees living in precarious conditions become digital citizens (Isin and Ruppert 2015) if not territorial citizens. Thus, research on connected refugees and migrants becomes one of the new agendas in the bourgeoning literature on migration studies, especially since protracted refugee flows and mobility still continue.

Note

1. Throughout the article, I refer to asylum seekers, refugees and transit migrants in Turkey as temporary migrants. The term temporary as a common denominator of these migrant categories refers to the temporality of mobility, and to broad definition of 'being in transit' since the use of information and communication technologies is investigated in the context of mobility.

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