

How social media facilitate migration in Europe

Sara Abbasi

'Opportunity': picture taken by a Syrian refugee in Belgium.



Source: refugeepostcards.com

Whilst visiting Istanbul with my mother in 2015, I experienced fright and apprehension after my mother was told that she was late for check-in and therefore couldn't board the plane back to London. The uncertainty of her return home and concern for her safety was all I could think about as I flew

back to Copenhagen. What would she do by herself? Would she be safe in a foreign country? Would she be able to get home?

But these are questions refugees are asking themselves every day as they leave everything behind – everything they have ever known – in order to find solace and safety in a foreign, alien land. It is safe to say that the fear and anxiety I felt is pitiful when compared to the sentiments of people fleeing their states, often not by choice but due to the hopelessness of building a future at home or, worse, due to the fear of being killed.

Previously, the situation for refugees and migrants who moved abroad was made increasingly difficult, as they experienced detachment and isolation from their own communities of origin, with their existing social ties being cut. They had limited contact with their families and loved ones, as they kept in touch by sending letters, telegrams, and packages by mail, some of which could sometimes take months to arrive. Later, the boom in cheap international telephone calls served as social glue, enabling migrants and refugees to stay connected to their relatives and friends back home.

But since the rise of the internet, things have taken a whole new turn especially when it comes to communication. In today's network society, the speed and intensity of information flow has increased tremendously and is shaping the everyday lives of people. “[Social media] is very useful for refugees because it's one of the only ways to know what's going on in our country – by talking to friends and family, and by reading articles posted on the [Facebook] timeline. Most importantly, we can keep in contact with family to make sure they are safe. I mean, we miss them but through social media we can still talk and see each other, so it makes it better”, explains Khalil, a refugee from Palestine currently living in Denmark, who uses mostly Facebook and Instagram to stay in touch with his family and friends back home.

In addition to serving as personal communication tools, social media have evolved to become important information distribution channels. This revolution in information and communication technology is of particular significance for refugees, migrants, and their families and friends, who live geographically dispersed but often remain connected through transnational networks.

1. NEW TO THE COUNTRY

Refugees and migrants inevitably navigate an unfamiliar culture in their host country, especially when they first move there. They may have less friends and social networks in their new home, may need assistance and advice regarding health care, education, and employment, which in most cases operate very differently to the home country. Social media can therefore be seen as a useful tool for reaching out to newcomers, and in providing relevant information to assist in their integration. Local authorities and civil society organisations may also use platforms such as Facebook to organise outreach activities, in order to support refugees and migrants in settling down in their new homes.

'Starting again': picture taken by a Syrian refugee in Belgium.



Source: refugeepostcards.com

Online platforms can even help the newcomers to become acquainted with the way of life in the new country: “Facebook has helped me to get to know more about the Danish culture as, through the Danish pages, I follow the news of the country and get to know about the things [Danes] like and don't like, and even the music they listen to”, explains Khalil.

In some cases, social media are open to everyone, thereby creating a public sphere in which information can be published. This information has the advantage that it does not originate from any authorities and that it circulates through low-key channels, spreading very rapidly. Social media thus constitute a ‘backstage’ space of realistic information that can be conceived of as a form of resistance to dominant structures, such as the increasingly restrictive immigration regimes of advanced societies¹.

In the case of migrant and refugee networks, for example, information on upcoming rounds of legalisation, availability of informal jobs and accommodation, or illegal ways of crossing borders can spread very quickly, thus affecting the migration strategies of refugees and migrants. Social media can therefore be expected not only to strengthen people’s ability to migrate, but also to feed their aspiration to migrate.

Moreover, online platforms make it possible to access a wider range of individuals to whom we are weakly tied, if at all, and are effective in developing new relationships, as they lay the groundwork for formerly unacquainted individuals to connect. Through the open structure offered by social media, users can selectively create communities based on interest rather than prior acquaintance. Consequently, latent ties – ones that exist only technically – are activated. In other words, they are converted from latent to weak ties, by some form of social interaction between users.

2. USE OF FACEBOOK DURING THE REFUGEE MOVEMENT

Since the start of the European refugee movement, numerous private and public social media groups have been created in the Arabic language on Facebook and other platforms, such as Whatsapp. These groups have attracted thousands of subscribers and followers². Syrian refugees fleeing war in search of a new life in northern Europe have used social media to guide

1 Rianne Dekker & Godfried Engbersen (2012). How social media transform migrant networks and facilitate migration. International Migration Institute, University of Oxford.

2 Tom Rayner (2015). Refugees use social media as journey guide. Sky News.

them along their journey from Greece, through the Balkan states, to final destinations like Germany and Sweden.

The pages and groups have been used as valued sources of information for people right the way along the refugee route, to plan and organise the journey from the home country to Europe. Thousands have shared information advising those coming behind them on what to avoid, and asking questions of those in front about what to expect.

“I didn't join social media groups when planning my move to Europe, but I know that most people become members of such groups to find out which country is better to travel to and how the laws are in that country. Actually, we even have groups for refugees for each country in Europe, so you join the group and people ask each other about the laws in that country regarding refugees. You can also ask questions about life as a refugee, such as: how long does it take to get an answer for your case? How are refugees treated? Is there racism against refugees? People also ask for advice. I am a member of a Facebook group for refugees in Denmark, but I don't really use it. My sister, on the other hand, is a member of many groups”, says Khalil.

3. AN OPPORTUNITY TO REVIVE CONTACT

Social media offer the possibility for migrants to renew contact with important weak ties, thereby acquiring bridging social capital. For migrants, information on new destinations is more likely to spread through relatively weak connections than through close contacts.

Weak ties in destination contexts may function as ‘pioneers’, providing information or assistance to new migrants. In some cases, these weak ties evolve to become strong ties: “I know a lot of young men who use the internet to come to Europe. There are even popular Arabic songs about this. One song is named ‘Josephine’. It's about a young man who meets an older lady on the internet and starts dating her online, after a while she comes to Morocco on vacation and they eventually marry. I saw this happen when I was still living in Morocco. A friend of mine met a lady on the internet and she came to see him after 3 months of internet dating. They are still married after 10 years and even have children. So yes, many people are using the in-

ternet but I don't know how many succeed", explains Hamza, who came from Morocco to the Netherlands in 2001 as an irregular migrant³.

Latent ties, including far-removed acquaintances or total strangers, can often initiate contact via social media to get in touch with migrants in their countries of origin, asking for information about migration to and life in the destination context.

According to Douglas, who migrated from Brazil to the Netherlands in 2003 with his family members, being contacted by strangers is not unusual: "Two guys added me on Orkut and they asked me about the Netherlands. They wanted information. [...] I also heard this once from a friend of mine. He was also added by strange people. Some people meet up here through online connections. You see that someone else also lives here so you get in touch with him and arrange a meeting. [...] It is an easy thing to do. Everyone can connect. You can see where people live and connect to the people that live in, say, the Netherlands"⁴.

4. LENDING A HELPING HAND THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media pages are set up not just by those who are involved in the process of migration, but also by those in the host country, as a way to help newcomers to settle into the new and foreign society.

One such page is titled "Helping Local (Central Pa) Refugee Families in Need" which is a public Facebook group with 365 members, and was set up by two friends – Nay Rahman and Fouzia Abdellaoui – in order to help refugee families in the Central Pennsylvania area: "We started off this group as a clothing, blanket and coat drive, which had a successful turnout. After completing that portion, we wanted to keep this group active to continue to show our love and support, and to help out local refugee families who have resettled in the Central Pennsylvania area. If this interests people, we encourage them to join our group". After achieving their goal of collecting clothes and blankets for refugee families, the group has been kept active with members sharing articles and documentaries that help members to bet-

3 Dekker & Engbersen, p. 10-11.

4 Ibid, p. 11.

ter understand the situation of refugees, as well as posting links to charity pages that raise money for refugees.

‘All I’ve known’: picture taken in Paris by a former Somali refugee.



Source: refugeepostcards.com

Another public Facebook group is titled “Help the refugees in Macedonia” and has a wider reach, with 9,625 members. The group is constantly being updated with information about refugees that have been spotted in Macedonia and who might need help. A recent post read: “There [are] a group of immigrants on the island, most of them children and women in need of food assistance. 50 people. Sleeping on the street [and] do not have a place to live”.

The post was accompanied by a screenshot showing the exact location of the group on Google maps, as well as pictures showing the food the refugees had been eating (beans and bread), and how they had been sleeping rough near open waters. In less than an hour of the request being posted, a member had replied with a link to the Facebook page for United Rescue Aid, suggesting the member who had initially written the post get in touch to see if the organisation could assist the group.

An earlier message was posted on the group by a member from Euratsfeld in Austria, which shared a link to a charity page, with the following comment: "Hi friends! I want to update you about the case [of] Faisal - the disabled boy in Lebanon. Until now he just had physiotherapy, but now he needs surgery. Surgery will be on March 20th, if we can afford the costs. The surgery costs \$1000, but unfortunately now [there is] only \$60 left. I really ask for your help and support to [raise] as much as possible of the needed amount. The family cannot afford it (widow with 4 children in a camp in Lebanon) - otherwise the surgery has to be cancelled. Each little amount counts! Please help us to reach the goal and give Faisal a better future!".

This post did not have any interactions even after 17 hours of it being posted, suggesting that perhaps the members were suffering from compassion fatigue, and could provide advice but were more reluctant to assist when it came to monetary help. Perhaps this is because, as suggested by the post, members in the group had already helped to raise funds for Faisal's physiotherapy – donating more money therefore may not be feasible for everyone.

It is also interesting to note how such groups, though aimed at people from a particular country (in this case Macedonia) attract Facebook users from other countries (such as the member from Austria), who then share information about refugees in other parts of the world (such as the case of Faisal in Lebanon). This shows that social media connects not just refugees, but also people living in different parts of Europe, bringing them together to raise awareness, and to provide help, resources and assistance to those who need it. As a result, as members post in groups and share content related to refugees, latent ties are activated and converted into weak ties.

5. MORE THAN JUST A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

What started off as a way to interact with friends and family, has become one of the most powerful tools of our time. When it comes to refugees and migrants, social media play a big role in their lives – before their departure from their home country, after their arrival in the host country, and beyond. They provide a way for those planning their journeys to foreign lands to

weigh the risks, seek advice, take safety precautions, and, at times, prevent death. In the host country, online platforms are used to organise help, resources and assistance for the newcomers, in the form of clothes, food, advice and donations - such help is crucial for the integration of migrants once they're in the new society.

Whilst face-to-face interaction is also often necessary, social media acts as a safety net for those who have just moved thousands of miles away from home, enabling migrants and refugees to seek help despite potential communication barriers, and at the same time communicate with family and friends back home during difficult times.

But according to Luiz, who came from Brazil to the Netherlands in 2001 to marry a Dutch partner, how the experience of migration is portrayed by migrants on social media is misleading: "What I see a lot is that Brazilians put all their photos on Facebook or Orkut. So there is this image that life in the Netherlands is very pleasurable and nice. It spreads a wrong idea of what [is actually the case] here. There are people that get totally misled"⁵.

Social media may facilitate the journeys of migrants and refugees, but nothing can completely prepare them for what is to come once they arrive at their new homes.

5 Dekker & Engbersen, p. 15.

