

Smart Refugees: How Syrian Asylum Migrants Use Social Media Information in Migration Decision-Making

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Abstract

Social media are increasingly popular channels of information on which migrants base their decisions on whether to migrate and the destinations where to settle. While social media offer a relatively cheap, easily accessible, and media-rich means of communication, their use is not without challenges for asylum migrants. Various studies describe issues with access and evaluation of the truthfulness of available information for this specific group of migrants. This article discusses social media use by asylum migrants prior to and during migration. This study is based on in-depth interviews with 54 Syrian asylum migrants who recently obtained refugee status in the Netherlands. Syrians were the largest group of migrants applying for asylum in European Union (EU) member states in 2015 and 2016. The findings show that the majority of Syrian asylum migrants have access to social media information before and during migration, often through the use of smartphones. Besides uneven access to technologies, fear of government surveillance restricts the smartphone use of asylum migrants. The results of this study indicate that Syrian asylum migrants prefer social media information that originates from existing social ties and information that is based on personal experiences. Generally, this information is considered more trustworthy. Asylum migrants use various strategies to validate rumors that are present on social media and come from unknown sources. These strategies include checking the source of information, validating information with trusted social ties, triangulation of online sources, and comparing information with their own experience.

Keywords

Syrian refugees, social media, smartphones, rumors, trusted information

Introduction

The popularity of smartphone and social media use among migrants did not go unnoticed during the recent “refugee crisis.” In European public debate, stories and pictures of asylum migrants using smartphones were often met with criticism.¹ Asylum migrants with “luxury” smartphones were speculated to be “bogus refugees.” *The Independent* responded with an op-ed article entitled “Surprised that Syrian refugees have smartphones? Sorry to break this to you, but you’re an idiot” (O’Malley, 2015). The newspaper article argued that smartphones have become indispensable, particularly for refugees: “It is hard to think of a more useful thing to own than a smartphone, especially if you’re fleeing your home.” An article in a recent issue of *The New Yorker* describes the affordances of this device in detail regarding the “Perilous Odyssey of a Syrian Refugee who fled his home with three thousand dollars and a smartphone” (Schmidle, 2015). The use of a smartphone

was essential to this refugee to stay in contact with family and friends in Syria, to receive advice from his brother who was already living in Sweden, and to communicate with others whom he met on his journey to Europe while crossing 10 borders. Social media accessed through his smartphone were a crucial source of information in his migration decision-making. They helped him to improvise and modify routes to Europe based on the latest and most relevant information.

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Scholarly attention for migrants' use of smartphones and social media prior to and during migration has grown in recent years. Social media have become popular channels of communication that make prospective migrants more informed about possibilities to migrate and destinations to settle (Dekker, Engbersen, & Faber, 2016; Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2014). Particularly mobile devices such as smartphones are widely used among migrants. The "polymedia" affordances of smartphones go beyond calling and texting (Madianou, 2014). Smartphones also offer an Internet connection, Global Positioning System (GPS), and a digital camera, featured in various apps. The title of this article refers not only to this popular device but also to what migrants gain from using this: information and communication resources that enable them to develop "smart" strategies. Smartphones provide access to strategic information that is disclosed via social media that can be used prior to migration and also during the migration journey. However, studies also describe obstacles and risks in social media use, related to access and the circulation of misinformation (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Wall, Campbell, & Janbek, 2017).

Most studies on social media use in migration decision-making thus far have focused on labor migrants, students and family migrants (Dekker et al., 2016; Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2014). Social media use by the particular group of asylum migrants gained growing scholarly interest (Emmer, Richter, & Kunst, 2016; Gillespie et al., 2016; Zijlstra & Van Liempt, 2017). These recent studies indicate that smartphones and social media have become essential to 21st-century's asylum migrants. Social media and other smartphone applications for navigation and translation empower asylum migrants by making them less reliant on smugglers and their network ties in Western Europe. Collyer (2007, p. 674) refers to this newly gained self-reliance by speaking of "do-it-yourself migrants" (see also Zijlstra & Van Liempt, 2017). These studies also describe specific obstacles and risks in social media use by asylum migrants who are undertaking a perilous journey. Wall et al. (2017) speak of a situation of "information precarity" referring to issues not only of access to social media information but also of trustworthiness of social media information.

This study focuses on the agency of asylum migrants in maintaining access to and evaluating trustworthiness of information on social media during migration. It addresses the following research question: *How do Syrian refugees use and evaluate social media information prior to and during migration to the Netherlands?* The article reports on 54 interviews with Syrian refugees in the Netherlands in the spring of 2016. Syrian refugees represent a "strategic" research group for analyzing social media use by refugees in the digital age. Syrian refugees were the largest group of migrants applying for asylum in European Union (EU) member states in 2015 and 2016 (Eurostat, 2016). Many of them had access to social media information (Emmer et al., 2016). As of 2013, Syrians are the largest refugee group claiming asylum

and obtaining a refugee status in the Netherlands. Nearly all respondents in this study received a residence status and were still living in asylum centers at the time of the interview.²

After elaborating our theoretical framework and methodology, we first present findings on Syrian refugees' access to social media information—mostly via smartphones. This adds to existing theories on social media use during migration and risks of and impediments to social media access. Subsequently, this study explores how Syrian refugees evaluate the trustworthiness of social media information and how they validate information by various strategies. This provides insight into how information from social media was assessed in migration decision-making. From the perspective of the migrant, the study gives insight into online contact with smugglers, the reception of government information, and the evaluation of other networked information. These accounts of assessment of social media information contribute to theories on "information precarity" and "rumors" in migration networks.

Dealing With Information Precarity in Migration Decision-Making

Migrants face a situation of uncertainty about the conditions in potential destinations and about the future in general (Williams & Baláz, 2012). Asylum migrants are an even more vulnerable group. They leave their countries of origin in circumstances of war, political oppression, or extreme poverty. Destination countries are difficult to access due to border control and for asylum migrants it remains uncertain whether they will be granted a residence permit. Asylum migrants are often forced to cross borders irregularly and to make use of the services of smugglers. Uncertainty in asylum migration creates a common need for information to be used in migration decision-making (Carling & Sagmo, 2015; Witteborn, 2014).

In migration networks, information coming from governments, NGO's and previous migrants' experiences circulates. Increasingly, this information is exchanged through social media (Dekker et al., 2016). For migrants, social media offer a relatively cheap, easily accessible, and media-rich way of long-distance communication (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Two key affordances of social media in migration are the expansion of migration networks beyond existing ties and a diversification of available information on migration routes and destinations (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). Information that is shared on social media is often publicly or semi-publicly accessible. It does not only reach an existing group of persons to whom it is directly addressed but also others with access to the medium. This expands migration networks based on strong and weak ties with latent ties that are created by the technological infrastructure of social media. Furthermore, social media are a "weapon of the weak" allowing migrants to go beyond the "public transcripts" of national

governments and get access to “hidden transcripts” where official information can be challenged and where practical advice can be acquired for successful (irregular) crossings of borders (Scott, 1985, 1990).³

While these affordances have proven relevant to migrants in general, the use of social media by asylum migrants has gained only recent scholarly interest. Studies show that social media have become indispensable for asylum migrants as well (Emmer et al., 2016; Gillespie et al., 2016; Zijlstra & Van Liempt, 2017). However, more than labor migrants or family migrants, asylum migrants are dealing with “information precarity” in using social media technologies (Wall et al., 2017, p. 242). Information precarity is a state in which asylum migrants’ access to news and personal information is insecure, unstable, and undependable, leading to potential threats to their well-being. In case of social media, information precarity is caused by limited access, and diminished trustworthiness of social media information.

First, access to social media can be a challenge for asylum migrants. Leung (2010) describes challenges of access, affordability, surveillance, and connectivity of others in migrants’ social networks. Access to Internet via Wi-Fi or SIM-cards and means to charge the smartphone’s battery are not always available. This creates a general lack of connectivity among asylum migrants. New opportunities for digital surveillance of (irregular) migration and digital border control pose a particular risk to smartphone and social media use by asylum migrants (Dijstelbloem & Meijer, 2009; Engbersen & Broeders, 2009; Wall et al., 2017). Using mobile devices and social media becomes a risk in itself by making asylum migrants vulnerable to unwanted surveillance by state and non-state actors. Studies indicate that asylum migrants use strategies to avoid this risk, for example, through the use of pseudonyms and avatars (Gillespie et al., 2016).

Second, migrants’ access to social media is no longer the only relevant topic of research. The availability of more information via social media does not always mean being better informed (Zijlstra & Van Liempt, 2017). Social media enable the extension of one’s social network with weak and latent ties and allow information to circulate on an informal basis. This creates uncertainties about the truthfulness of information that is shared online (Misztal, 2000, p. 188). While migrants are often aware of the uncertain nature of social media information (Burrell, 2012; Emmer et al., 2016; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Parreñas, 2005), they are very dependent on this type of unverified information. As marginalized groups, they cannot always trust information from authorities (Burrell, 2012; Carling & Sagmo, 2015). Other information is more speculative, for example, when it is unclear who the source of information is and with what motives the information is shared. Social media information can be false or biased by the vested interests of the source of the information, for example, smugglers making false promises, or governments aiming to deter unauthorized migrants. In their conceptual article

on rumors and migration, Carling and Sagmo (2015) argue that rumors are a common factor in migration decision-making. They refer to the definition of rumors by DiFonzo and Bordia (2007): “unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements in circulation that arise in contexts of ambiguity, danger or potential threat, and that function to help people make sense and manage risks” (p. 13). In the context of migration, rumors are “hypotheses” about a future situation upon which migrants act. They function as a form of collective sense-making (Carling & Sagmo, 2015: p. 4). Validating rumors into “trusted information” becomes key when using social media (cf. Hagen-Zanker & Mallett, 2016; Zijlstra & Van Liempt, 2017).

This article aims to contribute to theory development on how asylum migrants deal with information precarity in migration decision-making by focusing on the agency of asylum migrants in dealing with issues of access to and trustworthiness of social media information. In the next section of this article, we introduce our methodology. In presenting the results of this study thereafter, we will first address issues of access to social media information and subsequently discuss issues of dealing with the uncertainty of social media information.

Methodology

Research Population and Sampling

This study is based on personal interviews with 54 Syrian refugees who received a residence status or were about to obtain one in the Netherlands in February and March of 2016. During the European refugee crisis, Syrian migrants constituted the largest group of asylum requests in the Netherlands: 47% according to Immigration and Naturalisation Service (Dutch acronym: IND; IND, 2015, p. 4). In 2015, a total of 18,670 first-time asylum applications and 8,980 follow-up applications were registered (Netherlands Statistics, 2016). In 2015, the chances of obtaining a residence permit were very high for Syrian asylum migrants, as 98% of the Syrian asylum migrants were granted a permit (Eurostat, 2016).

Access to the respondents was provided by the Dutch Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Dutch acronym: COA). COA is the Dutch government agency responsible for the reception, supervision, and housing of asylum seekers in the Netherlands. Our sampling approach allowed us to conduct the fieldwork in a relatively short period, as respondents could be approached at four central asylum locations where the respondents were living at that time (Wassenaar, Utrecht, Zeist, and Aalten). We only interviewed migrants who had recently obtained a refugee status or were about to obtain one, as we expect them to be able to speak more freely about their migration experiences. Local managers of the asylum centers assisted us in contacting the respondents. We explained to potential respondents that the

research was about access to information in migration decision-making and the role of the Internet. We also explained that it involved a study by university researchers and that the answers would be anonymous and would have no consequences for the respondent's residence status in any way. Respondents were given a gift card of 15 euros as a gesture of gratitude for their participation.

We sampled our respondents purposively to gain a heterogeneous sample in terms of gender, age, and level of education. Digital divide studies demonstrate that Internet access and use varies according to these demographic characteristics (Hargittai, 2010). Gathering a diverse sample allowed us to achieve a varied image of social media use by Syrian refugees. This also means that our sample was not representative for the whole group of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands. Reasons for refusal to participate were not structurally recorded, but the number of refusals was relatively low. A few general trends were notable: Mentioning the gift card proved an incentive for respondents to participate. When we did not mention this beforehand, more respondents were inclined to refuse to participate. Furthermore, some refugees refused to participate because they feared having to provide too many details of their journey to the Netherlands. Women declined to participate more often. Therefore, in the asylum center in Aalten we purposefully approached female refugees for participation.

Our final sample consists in majority of men ($N=40$) and about a quarter of the sample consists of women ($N=14$). The majority of our respondents ($N=35$) is between 18 and 40 years of age. About half of the respondents ($N=22$) are higher educated (Higher Vocational Education/University education), 20 respondents finished secondary school or intermediate vocational education, and 12 respondents did not pass primary school or the first years of secondary school and are considered to be lower educated. The majority of our respondents arrived in the Netherlands in 2015 and followed the Balkans route to Western Europe, often traveling in groups. This was before this route was closed as a result of the refugee agreement between the EU and Turkey in March 2016. A common route entailed a transit in Turkey where a smuggler would help crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Greece. The respondents would proceed by land via Macedonia and Serbia traveling by public transport or car/truck. The mean duration of migration of our respondents was 21 days. For 87% of the respondents, the Netherlands was their desired destination, due to the presence of family or friends in the Netherlands. A small number of respondents had already made arrangements for traveling to the Netherlands before leaving Syria; among this group are three follow-up applicants.

Interviews and Analysis

Interviews took place in private rooms at the asylum locations. A female researcher and an experienced Syrian

interpreter conducted the interviews in Arabic. Three male and one female interpreter were recruited via the Foundation for Refugee Students (UAF). This foundation financially supports and offers counseling services to highly skilled refugees in the Netherlands. The interpreters also arrived to the Netherlands as Syrian refugees. The shared country of origin of the interpreter and respondent created a pleasant atmosphere at the beginning of the interviews. Each interview lasted 45 to 60 min, and most respondents agreed to have the interview audio-recorded ($N=4$ refused audio-recording). The interview was structured to ask more general questions at first and more sensitive questions (for example, about contact with smugglers) later on in the interview. The respondents did not seem uncomfortable answering these questions. The researchers noticed some indications of socially desirable answers. Some respondents seemed overly positive about the Netherlands. However, respondents also complained about their situation in the Netherlands, for example, about procedures taking a long time and having to face the same routine in the asylum center every day.

The interview guideline included open and closed questions and consisted of six parts: introductory questions about migrating to the Netherlands, access to information prior to migration, access to information during migration, general perceptions on the use of Internet during migration, sending information to contacts in Syria after arrival in the Netherlands, and some closing demographic questions. The interviews started by enquiring about various information sources (personal contacts, government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), etc.) and intermediaries (face-to-face contacts, mass media, Internet, etc.) used in advance and during migration. Later questions focused on the use of online information in particular. Instead of specifically asking about "social media"—of which respondents may have different understandings—we enquired more generally about the use of "Internet" and various devices. With closed questions, we enquired about the use of specific types of devices and social media to gain some context for the uses and strategies that are described.

All interviews were summarized in interview reports. Only the sections pertaining to the use of smartphones and social media prior to or during migration were fully transcribed. These transcribed sections were coded by the researchers. In a first round of open coding, interview fragments related to access to and evaluation of social media information were coded. In a subsequent round of coding, codes and patterns in the data were further elaborated in relation to theories on dealing with information precarity and rumors in migration decision-making. Quotes included in the next section are translated summaries of statements made by the respondents during the interview. We anonymized all respondents using pseudonyms and we refer to their gender and age at the time of the interview.

Table 1. Devices Used to Access Internet Before and During Migration.

| | Before migration | | During migration | |
|--|------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| | Primary device (N= 50) | Secondary device (N= 18) | Primary device (N=47) | Secondary device (N= 3) |
| Own PC | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Own laptop | 14 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Own tablet | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Own (smart)phone | 30 | 16 | 43 | 1 |
| Borrowed PC, laptop, tablet, or (smart)phone | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Internet café/library, etc. | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 |

Table 2. Websites and Applications Consulted Before and During Migration (Multiple Answers Possible).^a

| | Before migration, % (n= 51) | During migration, % (n= 47) |
|--|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Social networking sites (Facebook, LinkedIn) | 80 | 38 |
| Instant messaging (WhatsApp, Ping) | 63 | 66 |
| VoIP (Skype, Viber) | 47 | 38 |
| (Annotated) maps (Google Maps) | 20 | 64 |
| Video sharing (YouTube, Vine) | 14 | 4 |
| Government websites | 2 | 0 |
| Other (primarily websites found via Google) | 41 | 13 |

^aNone of the respondents, when asked specifically, reported using NGO websites, forums, picture sharing websites, weblogs, or microblogs. VoIP: Voice over IP; NGO: non-governmental organizations.

Findings

Accessing Social Media Information

The majority of our respondents used social media prior to and during migration to gather information to inform their migration decisions (cf. Emmer et al., 2016; Zijlstra & Van Liempt, 2017). Respondents often reported problems with Internet access due to power outages or weak Internet signals in Syria. As the quote by Mahdi below illustrates, they had relatively good access to Internet and social media through (free) Wi-Fi or purchasing local SIM-cards in the countries which they crossed:

In Syria, there was little internet connection. At home, I had a router to enhance the signal. During the journey it was easier to get an internet connection, except for Macedonia. I did not have local SIM-card in Macedonia. In Turkey there was internet in public transport. (Mahdi, male, age 35 years)

While this study does not include a representative sample of refugees, Table 1 indicates that (smart)phones are indeed the most popular devices to get Internet access. Prior to migration, more respondents reported (also) using their laptop or home PC. During migration, (smart)phones became even more popular.

Our respondents accessed a variety of applications primarily via smartphones. The choice of social media applications was informed by their specific information needs and familiarity with specific platforms. Table 2 shows that social

networking sites, instant messaging applications, annotated maps and GPS, and Voice over IP (VoIP) applications were the most popular. During the journey to Europe, there is an increased use of maps and GPS and decreased use of social networking sites and VoIP.

Although NGOs recently developed specific websites and apps for refugees (Gillespie et al., 2016), none of our respondents mentioned using them. This suggests that refugees are not aware that such sites are available, or that refugees do not trust these sites. Respondents reported that they accessed both public and private social media groups. About 12% accessed only public social media and 4% only private social media (media that can only be accessed with permission of the group administrator).

Social Media Information Needs

In general, our respondents value the use of social media prior and during their journey to the Netherlands. They mainly appreciated social media for the wealth of information that is available, the timeliness of the information, and specifically for information that is based on personal experiences. Social media empower refugees with various types of information, making them less vulnerable to fraud and misinformation. The majority of our respondents believe that without access to social media information, their journey to the Netherlands would have been very different. They also think that the trip would have cost them more:

When you do not have internet connection, you are an easy target for frauds and crooks. You cannot make contact with fellow travellers. (Mahdi, male, age 35 years)

Without the use of internet, my trip would have been much more expensive. For example, when you use the internet, it would cost you 1500 euros to come here. When you don't use internet it would cost you around 5000 euros because you would need to pay smugglers et cetera. (Hassan, male, age 27 years)

Above all, refugees valued social media communication with groups of fellow migrants who traveled a certain route a few days—or even hours—earlier. This helped inform them in detail about the accessibility and safety of various routes, keeping in contact via WhatsApp, Facebook, or Viber. Jamal and Mohammed provide examples of this:

We would keep contact through Viber with a group who left two hours before us. They would give us very up to date information. When you start your journey, you will receive the phone numbers of a hundred different people or so and when you have arrived, you don't know who they are any more. (Jamal, male, age 40 years)

We stayed at [the Greek island of, RD] Kos for three or four days and there we met a group of fellow Syrians. You feel an immediate connection when you meet fellow Syrians outside of Syria. We travelled in small groups at a time, about four or five people. Before they left, we exchanged phone numbers. (Mohammed, male, age 30 years)

Our respondents reported various information needs which social media fulfill. These include planning a route to Europe, learning about access to European countries, choosing a destination country, and keeping in touch with family and friends in Syria. However, the importance of social media information in the migration decision-making of asylum migrants should not be overestimated. Three reasons were given for Internet and social media to be less important than one might think. The first reason concerns the extent to which journeys were well-organized in advance. This was, for example, the case for the three follow-up applicants who were invited to the Netherlands by their families or others who traveled with a fake passport by plane:

I did not buy a SIM-card because my trip was already arranged before I left Syria. When I reached Greece, I went to a café and used the Wi-Fi that was available there. (Firas, male, age 30 years)

Second, the migration infrastructure that developed at Europe's outer border and along the major routes to Western Europe (cf. Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2017) provided information to asylum migrants that made online information superfluous:

The police helped us to take the bus and the train and the Red Cross also assisted us. I do not remember which countries we crossed. I travelled together with others and we took the bus and then the train. (Atifa, female, age 18 years)

The relevance of this migration infrastructure became particularly apparent when we enquired about contacting smugglers. Only five of our respondents reported that they used social media to find a smuggler and to discuss the smugglers' trustworthiness with trusted ties. As illustrated in the statements by Saad and Sayid below, most respondents report that they would simply meet smugglers on the streets in certain hubs on the route to Western Europe, for example, in Turkey, offering to assist in crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Greece. Only after meeting a smuggler did they use social media (WhatsApp or Facebook) to stay in contact with the smuggler and remain informed of the details of the trip:

When you are at this square in Istanbul, a lot of people approach you asking if you want to go to Greece. You don't need internet to meet them. (Saad, male, age 46 years)

The streets are full of smugglers in Izmir. They are using fake names. I did not use social media to contact them, they would just approach you. You don't need internet to find them. Also in Athens, there is this large square where many migrants gather. People will come and talk to you about ways to go to Europe. (Sayid, male, age 42 years)

Third, migrating to Europe and acquiring information and assistance during migration through smartphones often proved to be a group effort. This means that not every individual migrant needed a smartphone and Internet access. Similar to Mahdi, our respondents often traveled in groups and only a few members of these groups were in charge of planning and navigating using their smartphones:

We wanted to walk by ourselves instead of paying a smuggler. We used GPS to find the route. We started in Greece with a group of 75 persons. Five of them used GPS. We also contacted the first group [the group that left before them, HV] to find the way to Macedonia. So, I did not need a lot of information, except for the route and the others took care of that. I did not use internet myself. I only used my smartphone to take pictures. (Mahdi, male, age 35 years)

Especially older respondents reported not using smartphones themselves, but relying on fellow travelers. Access to but also sense-making of social media information became a collective effort (cf. Carling & Sagmo, 2015). This observation also fits Zijlstra and Van Liempt's (2017, p. 184) argument that the increasing ability of asylum migrants to arrange their own journey via social media, to share their expertise and take others along with them on their trip, blurs the boundary between "smuggler" and "migrant."

Obstacles in Social Media Access

Apart from the irrelevance of social media use for certain categories of asylum migrants, respondents also report practical obstacles to Internet access, ranging from a lack of Internet signal, empty batteries, or technical problems with their smartphones (cf. Leung, 2010; Wall et al., 2017), and solutions to circumvent these obstacles. Adnan's account is a clear example of this:

I brought a power bank to charge my phone during the trip. I did not know what it was before I decided to leave Syria. I looked it up on the internet and bought one. When we travelled by boat, I made sure to wrap my phone in plastic to protect it against the water. (Adnan, male, age 26 years)

Besides practical obstacles, our respondents mentioned two ways in which surveillance restricted their smartphone and social media use. First, several respondents reported that they stopped using social media the moment they suspected surveillance by government organizations. For example, if they feared that the police or coast guard would notice the lights coming from the smartphones or trace their signal and arrest them, they would refrain from using their smartphones and accessing the Internet:

At some points of the journey through Hungary, we turned off our internet in case of the police would find and arrest us. (Adnan, male, age 26 years)

Second, several respondents—including Amira—reported that smugglers would forbid the use of smartphones and the Internet. Smugglers feared that migrants would make noise and be noticed, or they feared that one of the people in the group would inform the police:

We travelled with 13 people in the back of a truck. I did not know the route and we could not see anything. We were only allowed to leave the truck at night. We were not allowed to use our smartphones or any internet. The smuggler took our phones from us. He said that it would be safer for us, that no one would call the police for example. (Amira, female, age 22 years)

Besides practical issues of smartphone use and Internet access that are specific to asylum migrants who are traveling to Europe irregularly, this study encountered two specific obstacles related to government surveillance: self-restriction and smugglers' restrictions to smartphone and social media use. This study indicates that a number of migrants are aware of digital surveillance of migration and digital border control (Dijstelbloem & Meijer, 2009; Engbersen & Broeders, 2009; Wall et al., 2017) and try to develop strategies to avoid this, such as turning off the smartphone or Wi-Fi signal.

Validating Social Media Information

The trustworthiness of online information was the main concern of our respondents in using social media in migration

decision-making. The main types of information that our respondents suspected to be rumors were information about the (duration of) the procedure to acquire a residence permit and information about the procedure for family reunification. Information about migration routes and smugglers was also often suspected to be based on rumors:

I heard that in Germany and Denmark, there is a lot of discrimination toward refugees. I also heard that in Sweden the procedures to acquire a residence permit take a long time. People told me that in the Netherlands, these procedures are shorter, that people are hospitable and that English is an important language that is spoken by many. (Nabil, male, age 30 years)

A lot of rumours circulated “they will take your money and your phone, you will end up in prison.” I also heard about rapes. They wanted to scare me, but my brother told me I shouldn't worry and he would help me. (Yara, female, age 40 years)

The above quotes by Nabil and Yara also indicate that rumors of both a migration-encouraging and migration-discouraging nature circulate in the social media networks of refugees (cf. Dekker et al., 2016).

What types of information are identified as rumors depends on the respondents' relation to the source of the information. Knowing and trusting the source of online information is an important factor in trusting that information. Most respondents—including Akram—preferred social media information that originates from existing social ties and information that is based on personal experience:

Personal experiences that are shared on Facebook are trustworthy. Those people followed the same routes and have gone through the same procedures. These different stories confirm each other. (Akram, male, age 25 years)

Others—mainly those lacking trusted ties in Europe—preferred information that originates from official websites of organizations, as the quote by Karam indicates:

I think that these individual stories of personal experiences are not trustworthy. Official websites from organizations are generally more to be trusted. I trusted information when I found it on an official website and when the source was reliable, for example a news website and when they are showing pictures of the news. Without pictures, the information is less reliable. (Karam, male, age 43 years)

In general, existing ties of migration networks are very important. Some of our respondents' networks included Syrian refugees who traveled before them and they thought could be trusted. The importance of trust and personal contact is again stressed when respondents indicate that one-to-one communication with known others via social media is more trustworthy than public communication of unknown others. Information that is publicly available on social media and comes from unknown sources is most commonly labeled as “rumors”:

Public information was not always very trustworthy. Private messages are more trustworthy. For example, when I communicated with someone living in the Netherlands, that gave me a good image of what life in the Netherlands looks like. (Amira, female, age 22 years)

To verify rumors, our respondents used various strategies, including checking the source of information, validating information with trusted social ties, triangulation of online sources, and comparing information with their own experience. In the following, we describe how these four validation strategies were pursued by our respondents. A first strategy many respondents used was checking the source of the information and the characteristics of the specific social media group or platform. Based on these qualities, they evaluated information differently:

Via Facebook groups like “Syrians in Holland” I looked up various stories. [. . .] There were many stories I did not trust. When I did not know the person posting something on Facebook, I did not think this information was trustworthy. (Ali, male, age 29 years)

Facebook is just very convenient, I have been using it since 2008 and I am very familiar with it. The information that I find there is trustworthy. (Amira, female, age 22 years)

Capitalizing on the specific affordances of particular platforms, they used various social media and Internet sites for different purposes. In this regard, smartphones function polymedia environments (Madianou, 2014; Madianou & Miller, 2012):

I use Google and official websites to look for information about rights and obligations and about civic integration, I use Facebook just to read other people’s experiences and I use WhatsApp to keep in contact with friends and family. (Hassan, male, age 27 years)

A second way to validate social media information and other online information was to cross-check it with information which the respondents received from trusted social ties. When information was confirmed by their social ties, preferably those who traveled to Europe before them, rumors were believed to be trustworthy. The stories of Bushra, Hassan, and Mahdi are examples:

Not all information is correct, there are many rumours of smugglers taking your money and not arranging safe transport. But I was in contact with my son to check these things. In the end, he did not always tell me the truth about the hardships of his journey, because he did not want me to worry about him. (Bushra, female, age 41 years)

I read information on the internet and judged it based on information I received from personal contacts. (Hassan, male, age 27 years)

I used WhatsApp to communicate with friends and family in Europe. I used Facebook to find information about the Netherlands, designated Facebook groups. Also I could find a lot of information about the Netherlands via Google. I only used those as additional information, I made my decision based on the information from my brother and friends. (Mahdi, male, age 35 years)

Third, we encountered examples of validation through triangulation of online sources. This strategy was particularly relevant to refugees lacking social ties in Europe. Respondents would check information they found on the Internet with other sources, online or offline. Confirmation through other sources and a large number of views, likes, or comments on social media pages indicated to our respondents that rumors were based on correct information:

If you read a large number of comments conveying a message from a similar perspective, you know that the information is correct. If it is only one person commenting this, I would not trust it. (Yara, female, age 40 years)

The more likes a Facebook page has, the more trustworthy it is. In Facebook groups you can find replies from many different people. When these are viewed many times, you can see if the information is trustworthy. When all replies are positive, then the information is good. It means that it indeed is a good hotel or something. (Adnan, male, age 26 years)

Finally, Syrian refugees compared online information to their ongoing migration experiences and their own judgments to validate it. When information proved to be trustworthy in a previous instance, it was also expected to be reliable in subsequent occasions, as the quotes by Rachid and Rima illustrate:

When I was about to travel by boat, I checked the sea conditions online. According to information on the internet, the sea would be rough, however when I went to check for myself this was not the case. I therefore did not think this information was reliable. (Rachid, male, age 18 years)

Before my journey to the Netherlands, I did not yet know how to judge the information. Only when I left for Turkey and Greece and when events happened according to the way people in on the internet wrote about it, I could judge information as trustworthy. I tried out information in reality and experienced whether information was trustworthy by doing so. (Rima, female, age 33 years)

While we cannot establish on which specific rumors the respondents acted based on this research design, we encountered an important difference between refugees with relatively open and those with fixed plans of migrating to Europe. Respondents who had fixed plans of traveling to the Netherlands and had already made arrangements did not let rumors on social media influence their plans:

I heard many rumours about the situation in the Netherlands. For example that the social benefits were bad. This did not influence my decision. I had a goal and for the future of my children, the social benefits did not matter that much. (Mahdi, male, age 35 years)

Many Syrians were saying that it would be easier to find a job in Germany, but I did not mind. My parents are farmers and wanted to go to the Netherlands because of the agricultural business there. I believe that the Netherlands is a country of freedom as well. (Rand, female, age 24 years)

Only when obstacles underway created a need to improvise, were their migration decisions influenced by social media information.

Refugees whose migration routes were less planned were more open to social media information in determining their route and destination—in addition to information from other sources—as becomes evident from Amani's explanation:

My sister lives in Sweden, so initially I wanted to go there, but during our trip I heard that the procedures in the Netherlands would move along more quickly and I wanted to be reunited with my whole family. Therefore, I decided that I would go to the Netherlands. My daughter is 20 years old and I heard that in other countries, that is too old for family reunification. (Amani, female, age 46 years)

These findings show that Syrian refugees indeed experience doubt about the trustworthiness of social media information. Therefore, they develop strategies to validate rumors. These strategies differ depending on availability of social ties in the destination context and information preferences. Rumors are more likely to affect the migration decisions of those who do not yet have fixed migration plans.

Conclusion and Discussion

Social media have become an indispensable source of information for today's refugees. They often access social media and other types of online information through smartphones. This study shows that a majority of Syrian refugees had access to social media information prior to and during their migration, often through the use of smartphones. We can characterize them as "smart refugees"—referring not only to "smart" phones with distinct polymedia affordances (Madianou, 2014) but also to what asylum migrants gain from using this device: information and communication resources that are essential for developing "smart" strategies of migration. These resources empower asylum migrants when dealing with more powerful actors such as smugglers or border control agencies. While this study does not include a large or representative sample of Syrian asylum migrants, similar findings on social media use were reached in other recent research projects (Emmer et al., 2016; Gillespie et al., 2016; Zijlstra & Van Liempt, 2017).

Studies describe specific obstacles to, and risks of, social media usage by asylum migrants who undertake a perilous journey, indicating a situation of "information precarity" concerning access to and trustworthiness of social media information (cf. Wall et al., 2017). Social media information in migration networks includes unverified and instrumentally relevant statements which can be characterized as rumors (cf. DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007). Rumors that are shared via social media are a mix of broadcast information from governments and mass media and narrowcast information based on individual experiences, including irregular routes and strategies (Bakewell & Jollivet, 2016, pp. 187–188). These rumors are circulating beyond migration networks consisting of personal ties. Having access to "hidden transcripts"—often located in (semi-) private social media groups—offers asylum migrants the possibility to verify "public transcripts" (including government information; cf. Scott, 1985, 1990). At the same time, accessing this social media information comes with obstacles and risks, and validating information becomes paramount. By studying how asylum migrants use and evaluate social media information prior to and during migration, this article has focused on the agency of asylum migrants in dealing with information precarity.

Our analysis demonstrates that asylum migrants have developed strategies to maintain access to social media, to avoid government surveillance, and to validate social media information. The majority of our respondents expressed doubt about the trustworthiness of certain types of social media information. Information coming from known social ties and information from government authorities and NGOs are trusted the most. Also for asylum migrants, the existing social ties are still the most highly trusted source (cf. Misztal, 1996, 2000). Information that is publicly available on social media and comes from unknown sources was less trusted and often labeled as "rumors." This is an interesting finding as closed information networks of known sources might just as well sustain rumors and prevent external validation (Burt, 2001). Future research should focus more extensively on which social ties are considered to be trusted. In traditional migrant networks, these are mostly strong ties of family and friends whom they know in person. For the generation of "digital natives" (cf. Prensky, 2001), online ties in well-known online communities or platforms may have become part of this group of trusted ties.

All in all, our findings support the conclusion that the use of smartphones and social media information makes asylum migrants less dependent on smugglers and network ties in Western Europe. In fact, as Zijlstra and Van Liempt (2017) observed, migrants at the same time make use of and contribute to the wealth of information that is available on social media—blurring the boundary between "smuggler" and "migrant." However, our analysis shows that not all asylum migrants equally depend on social media. Proper arrangement of the journey (often in cooperation with social ties in Western

Europe), the migration infrastructure that developed along the main routes to Europe (cf. Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2017), and migration as a collective effort makes asylum migrants less dependent on a smartphone and Internet access.

Future research should furthermore focus on how social media information influences migration behavior. It would be particularly interesting to see whether asylum migrants respond differently to migration-encouraging and migration-discouraging rumors, as some studies indicate that migrants trivialize information about the risks faced by, and failure of, others who traveled earlier (Belloni, 2016; Carling & Hernández-Carretero, 2011; Schapendonk & Van Moppes, 2007; Townsend & Oomen, 2015). Our study does not indicate that asylum migrants trivialize information about risks. Instead, they attempt to estimate risks by weighing encouraging and discouraging information.

Finally, it would be fruitful to study how border control agencies adapt to newly available social media data by surveillance and big data analysis. Governments increasingly monitor social media data and take social media data of individual asylum applicants into account in the immigration procedures. In the Netherlands, all digital data carriers of asylum applicants (including laptops and smartphones) are subject to a “quick scan” as a part of the asylum procedure. When additional information is desired, all data are copied and subject to analysis (Ministerial Inspection Security & Justice, 2016). It is likely that asylum migrants who know about this develop counterstrategies to divert these new forms of surveillance similar to how they are doing this on route (Broeders & Engbersen, 2007). For example, migrants may start to erase or get rid of their smartphones before entering the asylum procedure. In that case, migration networks that are sustained or established via social media will be harmed.

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Notes

1. We speak of “refugees” and “asylum migrants” at different points in this article. When referring to the respondents of this study specifically, we use the term “refugees.” Our respondents were (nearly) all granted asylum in the Netherlands at the time

of the interviews and can be considered refugees according to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. When referring more generally to people who migrate with asylum as their migration motive, we speak of “asylum migrants.” This analytical category emphasizes a similar migration experience regardless of whether an asylum request was eventually made and granted.

2. Three respondents did not yet receive a residence status, but were in the process of obtaining one.
3. The concepts of public and hidden transcripts are from James Scott (1990, pp. 1-16). In this article, public transcripts relate to the open and public communication between governments (those who dominate) and migrants (the subordinates). Hidden transcripts are discourses that take place “off stage,” beyond direct observation by powerholders (Scott, 1990: 4).

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