Migrants with mobiles

Phones are now indispensable for refugees

Technology has made migrating to Europe easier. Over time, it will also make migration easier to manage

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SOMETIMES Hekmatullah, a 32-year-old Afghan, has to choose between food and connectivity. "I need to stay in touch with my wife back home," he says, sitting in a grubby tent in the Oinofyta migrant camp, near Athens. Because Wi-Fi rarely works there, he has to buy mobile-phone credit. And that means he and his fellow travellers—his sister, her friend and five children—sometimes go hungry.

Such stories are common in migrant camps: according to UNHCR, the UN's agency for refugees, refugees can easily spend a third of their disposable income on staying connected. In a camp near the French city of Dunkirk, where mostly Iraqi refugees live until they manage

to get on a truck to Britain, many walk for miles to find free Wi-Fi: according to NGOs working there, the French authorities, reluctant to make the camp seem permanent, have stopped them providing internet connections. Some of the residents buy pricey SIM cards brought over from Britain, where buyers need not show an ID, as they must in France. A lucky few get airtime donations from charities such as "Phone Credit for Refugees and Displaced People".

When refugees leave their homes they enter what Carleen Maitland of Penn State University calls an "informational no-man's-land". Where should they go, and whom should they trust? Phones become a lifeline. Their importance goes well beyond staying in touch with people back home. They bring news and pictures of friends and family who have reached their destination, thereby motivating more migrants to set out. They are used for researching journeys and contacting people-smugglers. Any rumour of a new, or easier, route spreads like wildfire. "It's like the underground railroad, only that it's digital," says Maurice Stierl of Watch The Med, an NGO that tracks the deaths and hardships of migrants who cross the Mediterranean, referring to the secret routes and safe houses used to free American slaves in the 19th century.

Outside Moria, a camp on the Greek island of Lesbos, food shacks run by locals have sprung up. All provide phone-charging points; groups of migrants huddle around them. Minutes can be bought with cash from charities such as Mercy Corps, which operates in Lesbos and Athens. Yahye, a 26-year-old from Somalia, uses his to check the news from across Europe each day, trying to gauge where he might be accepted. He had planned to go to Norway, until his research put him off. "Norway does not want a lot of refugees," he says. Now his goal is Germany.

In Britain Najeeb, a 30-year-old Syrian engineering student, illustrates how a single piece of information can make all the difference. Unlike most of the more than 1m refugees who arrived in Europe in 2015, he came neither by boat nor by foot, but flew from Greece to London. His smuggler, to whom he paid €10,000 ($11,000) for as many fake passports as he would need, had advised him to use a small airport on one of the Greek islands, where security can be lax. To know when it was best to try to get on a plane, he had to stay in constant contact with his smuggler. On his third attempt, he got through.

Digital duelling

Information and communications technology show up right through what researchers call the "refugee life-cycle". People in northern Iraq use WhatsApp and Viber to talk to friends who have made it to Germany; UNHCR uses iris scans for identification in camps in Jordan and Lebanon; migrants on flimsy rubber boats in the Mediterranean use satellite phones provided

by people-smugglers to call the Italian coastguard; and geeks in Europe teach refugees how to code so that they can try to get jobs. Aid groups must work out who needs their help. Governments must monitor their borders and keep track of arrivals.

As African migrants continue to travel by boat to Italy, and the 60,000 refugees, including many Syrians, who are stuck in camps in Greece try to find ways to get out, Europe is experiencing what Alexander Betts of Oxford University calls a "technological arms race". It starts before a migrant arrives in Europe. The situation room of the Maritime Rescue Co-ordination Centre (MRCC) in Rome is dominated by two large screens, one showing boats run by NGOs and EU military vessels in the central Mediterranean, and the other conditions at sea. Employees of the Italian navy take calls on an array of red telephones from migrants with satellite handsets whose boats are in distress and inform any rescue boats in the vicinity. It is essential that the location is pinpointed: the central Mediterranean, which 180,000 migrants crossed last year alone, is the deadliest migration route.

Once a migrant has made it across a border, by whatever means, governments and aid agencies will attempt to monitor his movements by adding him to one of a number of increasingly sophisticated databases. The oldest and biggest is UNHCR's ProGres, which grew out of the Kosovo crisis in the late 1990s. When the agency realised that it was ill-equipped to track those fleeing from the fighting, it began standardising its procedures and technology. Today ProGres contains data—name and age, as well as facts about relatives, health issues and applications for refugee status—for more than 7m refugees, about 11% of all displaced persons globally.

ProGres is also used to verify identity. In some camps UNHCR now uses biometric data, such as fingerprints and iris scans, to make sure aid goes to the intended recipients. In Jordan and elsewhere in the Middle East many of the 2m refugees reliant on the UN's World Food Programme identify themselves at eye scanners when buying groceries or withdrawing money at an ATM. After biometrics were introduced in the Kenyan refugee camps of Kakuma and Dadaab in 2013, their recorded populations fell steeply, saving $1.4m a month that the programme had previously paid out to fraudsters to support imaginary refugees.

Europe has had a similar database, Eurodac, since 2003. It stores fingerprints from asylum-seekers and notes where they were first fingerprinted. (Under an EU-wide agreement, the country they arrive in first is supposed to be responsible for processing asylum claims.) The strain Eurodac was put under when Syrians started arriving by the hundreds of thousands in 2015 was visible in places like the Moria camp in Lesbos. During a visit last year migrants could be seen being interviewed and fingerprinted in shacks. Rumours swirled that patchy

internet connections sometimes left the registration computers unable to check the Eurodac database. Border officials said that some migrants had been able to register several times without being found out, meaning they could sell fake registrations to others whose origins were less likely to lead to asylum.

The European countries that have received the most refugees have worked hard to upgrade their systems. Since last year all agencies dealing with refugees in Germany have had to link their databases (the new law has a quintessentially German name: "Datenaustauschverbesserungsgesetz"). Asyl Online, a new system built by Germany's federal office for migration and refugees, enables a refugee to be registered in just a few minutes, including checks to see whether an asylum claim has already been made elsewhere in the EU. The process used to take two days.

Sweden, which for its size accepted more refugees than any other European country in 2015, has spruced up its registration systems, too. In the city of Malmo a former television studio now houses one of the country's largest migration centres. Behind a clean, spacious waiting room are a series of interview rooms equipped with fingerprint-scanners and cameras. A migration officer can continue processing asylum-seekers even if they have moved away from Malmo: some rooms in the centre are set up for video-conferencing.

As more information about migrants is collected and stored, some risks are becoming clear. Sensitive data could fall into the wrong hands, for example those of the government a refugee is fleeing from. UNHCR's policy is that refugees' data can only be collected with their consent, but that is a slippery concept in the context of an asylum claim. "Will a refugee, who does not enjoy the protections of citizenship, be granted privacy rights to data stored in a cloud service?" asks Ms Maitland of Penn State University in a forthcoming book about migration and technology.

Another risk, says Ms Maitland, is mission creep. Germany wants to speed up the integration of asylum-seekers by adding information about schooling and qualifications to Asyl Online. But not all extensions to databases will be so obviously in migrants' interests. Pressure is mounting to give law-enforcement bodies more access to Eurodac. In America the databases of the Department of Homeland Security and other agencies are already linked, creating what some call a system of "automated immigrant policing". Since his inauguration last month Donald Trump has said he wants his administration to publish weekly lists of crimes committed by immigrants. Details are unclear, but presumably these databases would make this easier.

UNHCR has tightened its privacy policies in recent years. But some question whether building ever-more-powerful identity-management systems is in any case the best approach. iRespond.org, an NGO, for instance, has developed a more focused service that allows medical charities in poor countries to keep track of patients without having to operate their own databases: rather than maintaining a long list of names and other data, it stores only unique biometric identifiers.

The most immediate risk posed to migrants by communications technology is perhaps the spread of misinformation. According to Petra Matic, a volunteer at the camp in Dunkirk, when the nearby Calais camp started to be cleared in October a false rumour spread that residents would be deported to Iraq. Karim, one of the refugees in the camp, arrived from Germany, where he had been recognised as an asylum-seeker and was attending school. He had heard that Britain, where his brother lives, would now accept all refugees aged under 17. He is wrong, and is risking his life every night trying to get onto a truck crossing the Channel.

Dial M for Migrant

Some organisations are trying to use migrants' reliance on online information in ways that benefit both migrants and their host countries. The European Asylum Support Office, which runs the EU's relocation scheme, has created a Facebook page, an app and videos about life in various countries other than Germany and Sweden, in an effort to persuade some of the migrants clustered in those two countries to consider moving on. In Berlin the ReDI School of Digital Integration is teaching migrants how to code. Last year the philanthropic arm of Google donated $1m to the Clooney Foundation for Justice, a charity, to create pop-up schools in Lebanese camps with laptops pre-loaded with teaching materials. Better access to Wi-Fi would make such efforts easier and cheaper.

In Europe, even in camps where charities have been able to set up Wi-Fi, refugees are mostly left to while away their time on social media, rather than encouraged into digital classrooms. One reason is that host governments are wary that camps will become permanent—and reluctant to accept that many migrants will never return to their own countries. But as the Syrian war drags on, this is becoming untenable. Encouraging migrants to study online would help them integrate and, eventually, become productive in their new homes.
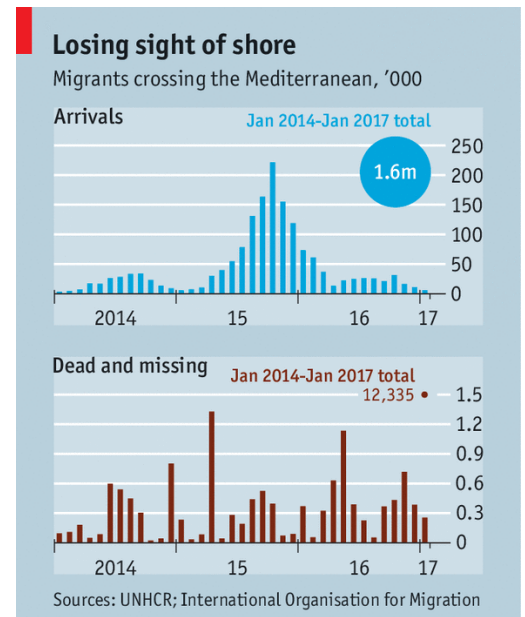
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