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**Chapter 8: Mobile Technologies and Forced Migration**

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**Abstract**

This chapter adopts a comprehensive approach to examine the role of mobile technologies for belonging and survival among forced migrants in transit who inhabit ‘techno-border-scapes’. It integrates the literature on state surveillance, digital activism and digital humanitarianism. Forced migrants in Calais live outside conventional forms of protection and assistance at the French-UK border. For them mobile phones are multi-functional devices and life-saving tools that intersect with all dimensions – practical, affective, economic, social and political – of their lives. They are enabling but also constraining devices that produce digital inequalities.

**Introduction**

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) increasingly influence our social relations, political imaginations, economic transactions, cultural productions and affective lives. We live in networked societies (Castells, 2011) where smartphones, instant messaging, navigation devices and social media applications create new kinds of daily experiences and social interactions (Elliott and Urry, 2010). Mobile technologies refer to those systems, applications and material objects which can be easily transported and transferred.

These ‘digital infrastructures’ are composed of devices such as mobile apps, websites, messaging and calling platforms, social media and translation services (Gillespie et al., 2016). In recent years~~,~~ there has been a growing interest in the use of mobile technologies, not only among the general population, but also among relatively settled forced migrants and diasporas who increasingly lead transnational lives (see for example Diminescu, 2012; Everett, 2009; Oiarzabal and Ulf-Dietrich, 2012; Schapendonk, 2012), while the so-called European refugee ‘crisis’ has generated new questions about the intersection between forced migration and mobile technologies in the context of refugees’ increasingly long, complex and fragmented journeys.

In novel ways, States themselves have increased their use of technological devices to manage cross-border migration, securitise border areas and monitor the movement of people within nation-state borders (Andersson, 2015). Migrants and activists have responded to these technologically secured ‘borderscapes’ (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, 2007) by engaging in counter-bordering technological strategies of resistance. Humanitarian workers have embraced technological innovations to respond to the changing humanitarian and technological needs of forced migrants in transit.

Understanding the role of mobile technologies in forced migrants’ lives and journeys in rapidly changing contexts is a key issue in forced migration studies for two main reasons. First, given the increasing relevance and multi-functional purposes that mobile technologies have in the everyday lives of migrants, it is important to understand the ways in which they are used, the functions they fulfil, the roles they play and the challenges they create. Such analysis contributes to the understanding of an under-researched dimension of the experience of forced migrants~~,~~ and the role of mobile technologies in enabling, constraining and transforming human mobility. Second, the use of mobile technologies influences research methodologies and concepts in the field of forced migration. Scholars need to revisit concepts like transnationalism, belonging, security, activism and humanitarianism through the digital lens, and examine whether the use of ICTs alters in cosmetic or substantial ways the conceptualisation of the world in which migrants live.

In this chapter, we adopt a comprehensive approach to examine the role of mobile technologies among forced migrants in transit. The chapter is divided into three parts. In the first, we present a literature review of the ways in which established diasporas, migrants and refugees use mobile technologies to form online transnational connections, experience new modes of belonging and engage in transnational political activism. Second, we examine the ways in which forced migrants in transit use mobile technologies to negotiate their movements in increasingly securitised ‘techno-border-spaces’, a term that we develop from Appadurai (1996)’s notion of techno-spaces. Lastly, we examine the use of mobile technologies among forced migrants in transit in Calais, at the border between France and the United Kingdom (UK). Until very recently, it was unusual for refugees who entered Europe to find themselves living in informal camps outside conventional forms of protection and assistance in what Agier (2016) calls borderlands. We argue that in these new settings, mobile technologies become multi-functional devices that organise various aspects of forced migrants’ lives and lifesaving tools which influence practical, affective, economic, social and political dimensions of forced migrants’ lives.

Taking a different approach from that of existing literature, we examine the real and virtual connections that unfold among different social actors (migrants, humanitarians, border guards and activists) who are simultaneously embedded in ‘techno-border-scapes’. With a focus on forced migrants, we show how their use of mobile technologies shapes and is shaped by their relations with others and their surrounding environment.

In this chapter, we use the terms ‘forced migrants’, ‘refugees’ and ‘asylum seekers’ to describe the nature of human mobility across borders. The journeys of forced and voluntary migrants are often similar: individuals have mixed motivations to move, and in transit places people whose immigration status is still undetermined reside together. It is for these reasons that we also use the more general terms ‘migrant’ and ‘transit migrant’ to refer to people on the move in general, which includes both forced and voluntary movement.

**Mobile technologies for belonging among relatively settled forced migrants and diasporas**

Movement and spaces feature prominently in the experiences of forced migrants, as individuals cross international borders, enter into longer and more fragmented journeys, spend time in transit and, even after arrival at places of destination, may move onwards, return, or move back and forth between places. Conversely, the virtual occupies no physical territory, as time and place shrink on computer and smartphone screens. Despite its placeless features, the virtual medium allows for the (re-)creation of place, making it simultaneously place-dissolving and place-generating (Diamandaki, 2003).

The use of new ICTs, especially mobile telephony, fulfils two distinct functions among forced migrants and diasporas. First, it contributes to the formation of new online places of transnational belonging that collapse conventional distinctions between homeland and hostland, the national and the transnational. Second, ICTs facilitate the online articulation, dissemination and promotion of social issues that unfold in the offline world. For relatively settled forced migrants and diasporas, smartphones and the internet become ‘mobile technologies for belonging’.

In a time of ‘personalised diasporas’ (Mitra, 1997), migrant, refugee and diasporic communities use virtual sites to build a ‘home away from home’ which collapses conventional distinctions between the national and transnational and to create transnational communities among migrants who live in different countries and are unable to meet in person (Donà, 2014). Because of its widespread accessibility, the internet has become ‘the social glue of migrant transnationalism’ (Vertovec, 2009:54). Mobile technologies also play an important role in the creation of de-territorialised spaces of belonging for immobile populations. Somali refugees transcend their immobility by interacting with family members and friends in transnational spaces (Horst, 2006a), while Palestinians living in camps use the internet as a mediating space through which they imagine a transnational Palestinian community (Aouragh, 2011). Similarly, asylum seekers confined in detention centres rely on mobile phones to keep in touch with the ‘outside world’ (Leung, 2011). The often repressive material conditions of encampment, detention and surveillance are among the reasons why ‘home’ is found elsewhere, in de-territorialised spaces (Donà, 2015). Mobile technologies also shape the process of identity formation, by offering the symbolic ‘proto-material’ – images, representations, discourses and interactions – from which transnational online identities are made (Diamandaki, 2003).

If mobile technologies contribute to the formation of new online spaces of transnational belonging, they also mirror real-life interactions and preoccupations. Chatrooms, newsgroups and blogs foster direct interaction and can, over time, create a sense of familiarity and intimacy among their regular users (Eriksen, 2006). These interconnected networks become transnational spaces for the expression of nostalgic ideas of the lost home, where uprootedness, dislocation, suffering, pain and remembrance are shared among digital diasporas. In a different manner, for refugees who are members of nations or groups without a state, the focal online discourse is projected towards the future homeland and the ‘right to return’. In addition to being a forum for the articulation of real-life preoccupations, mobile technologies also facilitate the actualisation of offline interactions and engagements. Migrants use social media to communicate, interact, exchange information and to promote cultural and religious practices that take place in the real world (Oiarzabal and Ulf-Dietrich, 2012). Migrants also advocate for real-life political changes that transcend homeland and host societies while also remaining connected to them (Godin and Donà, 2016).

The political nature of refugee movements means that politics are relevant for forced migrants in exile. The internet has transformed the ways in which refugees engage in political mobilisation across borders (Bernal, 2006; Oiarzabal and Ulf-Dietrich, 2012) through long-distance nationalism (Conversi, 2012; Mazzucchelli, 2012).But if transnational political engagements on the web are focused on the home country, they also reconfigure modes of citizenship (Kissau, 2012; Siapera, 2011) and engage with a range of transnational and trans-ethnic social actors (Anat, 2012; Graziano, 2012). Thus, the phrase ‘mobile technologies for belonging’ captures the formation and transformation of online as well as offline transnational social processes, relations and activities among relatively settled migrants, refugees and diasporic individuals.

The so-called European refugee ‘crisis’ that has unfolded since 2015 has generated new research on the intersection between mobile technologies and forced migration, especially for people who are on the move. Differing from research conducted with relatively settled forced migrants and diasporas, this emerging scholarship examines emergencies which occur during migration and the ways in which people on the move use smartphones and applications to navigate increasingly complex techno-border-scapes. We refer to this phenomenon with the term ‘mobile technologies for survival’. Technologies for belonging and survival are interrelated and coexist, but they also have distinctive functions and roles. The following section gives an overview of the emerging research on ‘mobile technologies for survival.’

**Mobile technologies for survival during journeys and in transit**

Similarly to relatively settled populations, people on the move use mobile phones to connect, stay in touch and reconnect. Smartphones have become the ‘network capital’ that enables transit migrants to communicate with families and friends as well as other migrants on the move (Gillespie et al., 2016), and function as archival technologies in which memories are stored through live photo albums and other digital media (Gillespie et al., 2016). In this regard, they function as technologies for belonging.

However, people on the move increasingly use mobile technologies to navigate securitised borderscapes. We refer to this emerging strategy as ‘mobile technologies for survival’. Gillespie et al. (2016)’s study on the current refugee ‘crisis’ shows that refugees rely on smartphones, Global Positioning System (GPS) and Google Maps to navigate their journeys. These applications become digital guides and travel companions, which can complement or replace the role of smugglers and agents, the latter of whom use smartphones and social media applications to ‘recruit’ refugees and to alert authorities to ‘rescue’ refugees whom they had in fact smuggled across borders. On the other hand, refugees lost at sea use smartphones to contact rescuers, while forced migrants on the move use new technologies to seek information from people who left before them in order to follow in their path. Smartphones and social media platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter) are thus used by migrants and refugees to crowd-source information.

However, social media sources are not always reliable. Refugees may have to depend on inaccurate information spread by smugglers that exposes them to danger (Gillespie et al., 2016). Mobile technologies can also pose a threat to migrants because they leave digital traces which can make transit migrants vulnerable to surveillance by both state and non-state actors (Gillespie et al., 2016). Additionally, not all migrants on the move have access to mobile technologies. In the same way in which class affects routes taken, means of migration and destinations (Van Hear, 2006), differential access and use of mobility technologies reproduce social inequalities among migrants. Mobile technologies can in fact reinforce power inequalities between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ among forced migrants, facilitating the journeys of some while making journeys more difficult for others.

Ownership of mobile phones by migrants can also be a double-edged sword. Schapendonck (2012)’s research on African migration to Europe describes how networked connections used by migrants can be traced back to the SIM cards in their mobile telephones. For this reason, mobile phones are the first assets confiscated by border guards when arresting transit migrants, with the goal of ‘taking them out of the network’ (p.134). In another context, Newell et al.’s (2016) study on information seeking and technology use among migrants at the United States-Mexico border shows how the disclosure of phone numbers of a migrant’s contacts or family members can lead to extortion and abuse. The mobile phone, often a lifeline until migrants reach the border, thus becomes a liability which places migrants, and their families back home, at risk. These limitations show that mobile technologies can empower migrants, but can also jeopardise their itineraries, resilience, and survival.

Mobile technologies, albeit with negative as well as positive effects, have nonetheless become essential multi-functional tools which can determine forced migrants’ access to vital services and support networks. During their journeys, migrants and refugees interact with other social actors, namely state agents, activists and humanitarians, all of whom also use mobile technologies. Taking a different approach to that of the existing literature, which tends to examine digital securitisation, activism and humanitarianism separately, we integrate these factors to show their interconnections within techno-border-scapes.

**Digital surveillance, activism and humanitarianism**

States use ICTs, including mobile technologies, to monitor and control the movement of people on and within borders. Monitoring devices such as motion sensors, infra-red equipment and surveillance cameras are widely used by state agents to manage cross-border movements and enact the surveillance of those who have crossed borders. These digital practices are especially concentrated at the edges of state territories – in their border zones. For example, in Europe the border agency Frontex has established multiple surveillance mechanisms to monitor, intercept, apprehend and push back or halt the passage of migrants between Greece and Turkey (Topak, 2014). The use of drone technology in border surveillance has increased over the last few years, challenging migrant and refugees’ human rights (Marin and Krajíková, 2016).

The use of these technologies creates new ‘digital borders’ which are distinct from physical and geographical borders (Bigo, 2014; Broeders, 2007). State controls extend over bounded territories and populations (Kuster and Tsianos, 2016). Transnational surveillance practices, which rely on ICTs, are increasingly addressing a public that is no longer defined exclusively as the citizenry of the nation state. Through the notions of bona fide global citizens and ‘crimmigrant’ others, Aas (2011) details how the seeming universality of citizenship is punctuated by novel categories of globally included and excluded populations. Because digital bordering practices alone cannot stop irregular migration, states also turn to internal control measures. Eurodac, an information, communication and technological tool of control, stores the fingerprints of asylum seekers and irregular migrants, regulating the mobility of non-EU citizens within the EU (Kuster and Tsianos, 2016). The identification and registration of people at the border is crucial for sorting legal and undocumented migrants, and subsequently excluding irregular migrants from societal institutions, discouraging their stay or deporting those who are apprehended (Broeders, 2009). Risk profiling thus becomes a tool of digital governance, through which ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ mobilities are kept separate (Amoore, 2006).

It is worth mentioning the ‘failed’ attempt by Frontex to commission tech firms to design smartphone apps and databases to track and manage the arrival of refugees to Europe (Taylor and Graham-Harrison, 2016). Refugee support groups and privacy organisations have argued that it would be difficult to convince refugees to download an app for their ‘safety’ (weather and routes) which could then be used to apprehend them. In spite of the existence of digital bordering practices, migrants appear to be able to negotiate such constraints (Warren and Mavroudi, 2011) and continue to cross borders (Topak, 2014).

In response to state digital securitisation, activists use mobile technologies to challenge and undermine current border regimes. For example, activist groups at the Mexico–US border use digital photography and video recording equipment to monitor state agents, while vigilante organisations use technologies to coordinate citizen-organised foot patrols that locate and assist migrants in danger. Such groups use Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to organise the provision of water and give high-resolution border maps to migrants to assist their journeys (Walsh, 2010). Asylum seekers have begun to record the testimonies of their journeys while crossing on boats, trucks and planes, and disseminate their stories via social media. In this way, asylum seekers become producers of their own narratives. These accounts challenge stigmatising perceptions of asylum seekers as security threats, and advocate for their rights as global citizens who are forced to flee because of a lack of democracy in their homelands (Whitlock, 2015).

Increasingly, activists and migrants have responded to the escalating presence of technologically secured ‘borderscapes’ (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, 2007) by engaging in counter-bordering technological strategies of resistance. The smartphone revolution shapes not only the ways in which migrants, states and activists operate, but also how relief workers deliver aid to forced migrants in transit and the kind of aid they deliver. The European refugee ‘crisis’ has generated a dynamic response from a novel and diverse constellation of actors: humanitarian organisations, state institutions, development cooperatives, non-governmental organisations and grassroots activists (Mason, 2016). Their responses are increasingly reliant on ICTs. ‘Digital humanitarianism’ extends the conventional delivery of aid to include the provision of technology-related services. WatchTheMed Alarm Phone, for example, is an organisation that offers an emergency phone service through which the nearest coastguards can be alerted in response to SOS calls from migrants whose boats experience crises in various stretches of sea around Europe. The organisation has received around 1,400 distress calls in the 15 months up to February 2017 (Taylor and Graham-Harrison, 2016).

Within digital humanitarianism, mobile technologies become a form of aid in themselves. The Central European University in Budapest, Hungary, developed **battery-powered Wi-Fi hotspots that can be worn in a backpack**, along with **charging banks** assembled from components bought from high-street stores, to help refugees charge their phone batteries as they move across Europe. In Jordan, UNHCR launched a new programme which gives Syrian refugees custom-designed mobile phone SIM cards through which they can receive mass information messages (IRIN, 2013). These examples indicate that digital humanitarianism is increasingly expanding to include the provision of emergency technological services, the use of technologies to deliver aid more effectively, and suggest that telephonic technology is becoming a form of aid provision.

Reliance on new technologies changes the needs of refugees, who need not only food, shelter, and protection but also access to electricity and **Wi-Fi**, services that would have been an afterthought even a few years ago (UNHCR, 2016). As one refugee from Syria told AFP news agency, ‘Our phones and power banks are more important for our journey than anything, even more important than food’ (Worley, 2016: 1). However, the tendency to substitute old humanitarian tools with new ones, especially with digital innovations, has progressively led to what Scott-Smith (2016) labelled ‘humanitarian neophilia’, in which markets and technologies are presented as solutions to a failed aid system. Their supporters ‘understate’ the role of the state and ‘overstate’ the objects and vision of self-reliant subjects (Scott-Smith, 2016). It is therefore important to question how digital humanitarian innovations are genuinely benefiting their intended beneficiaries and remain autonomous in increasing complex environments.

To conclude, various social actors use mobile technologies in ways that intersect, reinforce and challenge one another. In the next section, we present the case study of the use of mobile technologies by migrants and refugees in the techno-border-spaces of Calais. We aim to offer a comprehensive analysis of the centrality of mobile technologies, with enabling and constraining consequences, for forced migrants and the actors with whom they engage.

**Forced migrants in transit at the border in Calais**

Since the late 1990s, migrants and refugees have been gathering in informal camps at Calais, near the securitised border between France and the UK. In 1999 the Red Cross set up a centre at Sangatte, which was closed down three years later. However, over the years informal settlements continued to form, only to be demolished, and then reconstituted. Prior to its official closure in October 2016 and the eviction of its residents, around 8,000 individuals lived in what was known as the Calais Jungle (Help Refugees, 2016). Even though the camp was dismantled, people continued to congregate at the border in Calais to attempt to cross the Channel. The formation of the Jungle and of the Sangatte Centre beforehand, together with other informal settlements for transit migrants that are situated outside conventional forms of protection, citizenship and belonging, and which continue to proliferate across Europe, comprises a new phenomenon in Europe, making it a key issue in contemporary forced migration studies,. In a traditional country of permanent resettlement, the camp signals the existence of informal sites of migrants who are contained within the borders of nation-states but exist outside the nation-state imagination. They are ‘in’ but not ‘of’ (Baumann, 2002) the national space of belonging.

So, while the Calais Jungle was located in French territory, its residents did not benefit from mainstream services. In the camp there was no running water, latrines were temporary and portable, and electricity was only available in the few places which had generators. Migrants in transit have limited access to emergency health or welfare services. Informal solidarity networks of activists and volunteers, rather than government agencies or formal aid organisations, deliver assistance to the migrants. In the Calais informal settlement, transit migrants experience informality of responses and precarity of existence. In this new European context, securitisation and control of migration become tighter, undocumented border crossings are on the increase and official responses are limited. It follows that precarity of status prevails. In this informal border-scape, migrants and refugees rely heavily on mobile technologies for multiple purposes, one of which is to facilitate engagement with other social actors who also use mobile technologies. Mobile technologies thus comprise the means through which migrants and refugees and other social actors are embedded in techno-border-scapes.

Our study on the use of mobile telephony among forced migrants in the Calais Jungle stems from a civic engagement project run by the Centre for Narrative Research at the University of East London, which delivered accredited short university courses on ‘Life Stories’ to migrants in transit. Participant observation, life narratives and informal conversations about the use of technology with (now former) residents of the Calais camp, including those with whom we had developed contacts and relationships through the ‘Life Stories’ project[[1]](#endnote-1), took place between September 2015 and October 2016. We adopted the role of researcher/activist/volunteer at different points in time. The mobile phone, and in particular smartphones, became an important methodological tool for collecting information, maintaining contact with the residents and supporting them in their day-to-day survival. The field of forced migration has undergone a shift from research framed by methodological nationalism towards multi-sited research and, more recently, digital methodologies (Donà, 2014). Digital research with forced migrants can be divided into three broad categories: the analysis of online sites and web posts used by forced migrants and diasporic groups (Brinkerhoff, 2006; Diminescu, 2012; Doná, 2010; Donà, 2014); interviews and group discussions with forced migrants about their use of mobile technologies (Wall et al., 2015; Aouragh, 2011); and the mixed-method integration of online and onsite methods (Aouragh, 2011; Brinkerhoff, 2006; Godin and Donà, 2016; Halilovich, 2013). Our research project relies on the use of mixed-methods both online and onsite.

*The mobile phone as lifeline*

In the context of precarity during transit migration, mobile phones become multi-functional devices around which various spheres of forced migrants’ lives revolve. They are not accessories but essential lifeline tools, used to promote local and transnational belonging and survival in ways that are context dependent. Mobile technologies allow people in transit to keep in touch with family and friends. Communicating with family back home or across locations reassures loved ones that the journey is almost ending and to lessen their worry. This means that sometimes, forced migrants send back selfies in front of houses, cars or at the beach in Calais instead of images of the refugee camp as ways of concealing the reality of their circumstances.

Mobile phones also enable forced migrants to connect with other residents of the camp, be they others on the move or smugglers. Everyday survival in the camp depends on relationships between residents as well as between resident and non-resident volunteers. Social interactions among residents and volunteers in such a volatile environment are built around trust and personal relationships that are fostered through social networking. These interactions are conducted in person but also via text or phone. During one of our visits, one refugee from Afghanistan was called innumerable times by phone to interpret for a co-national who did not speak English and needed to be registered with French authorities. Refugees therefore become providers of social services in the camp, a role enabled through their use of mobile technologies. Late at night, one woman residing in the fenced compound inside the Jungle used her text messaging service to ask a volunteer to bring some water rather than taking the risk of going out alone. The registration of migrants in the camp, the organising of translation sessions, and the filling out of forms are just a few examples of the micro-coordination that mobile phones enable in techno-border-scapes. Smartphones are also used to keep up-to-date with news, culture and sport in countries of origin and the diaspora. They are recreational devices for listening to music, watching videos and playing games in native languages and scripts, and for sharing practical information about Calais, routes into the UK, or the European asylum system.

Transit migrants living in the Jungle camp also used mobile phones to engage in transnational politics but also used mobile phones to address local and context specific issues. First, they documented directly the violence that police and fascist groups use against them. They used the internet as a form of digital activism with which they could bear witness to the violence. Second, some of the inhabitants of Calais used social media to criticise European refugee and asylum policies generally, as well as at the border between France and the United Kingdom, denouncing their inadequacies in addressing their reality of movement. Third, Calais residents shared information about the political situation back home, not only with the aim of changing the situation in their countries of origin, but also to raise awareness about the legitimacy of their presence in Europe as refugees. They shared online images of widespread and protracted violence in their countries of origin (e.g. Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran) to explain their presence in Europe and to provide visual documentation of the dangers awaiting them in the event of their being repatriated. Lastly, the Calais residents raised awareness of the experience of being a refugee in the Jungle by using social media to articulate a politics of the representation of refugee voices, through which they could become technologically present figures of identification and empathy. Through these uses of mobile technologies, online political engagements intersected with offline political activism, such as participating in demonstrations, undertaking hunger strikes and talking to the media.

*Securitisation and safety*

The Calais case shows that mobile phones are used not only for belonging but also for survival in the new techno-border-scape of securitisation and insecurity. The Calais Jungle was located beside the highly securitised border of the Channel Tunnel, surrounded by high white walls, barbed wires, cameras and surveillance mechanisms. Inside the Jungle, technology was used to control and to enable securitisation, but also to give protection to vulnerable residents, most notably single women, girls, mothers and children, on the grounds of health and safety concerns. Migrants in Calais used their phones to find safety in the knowledge that friends and agents could monitor their journey and that they in turn could monitor the crossing of the Channel made by family and friends. One Afghan resident who had opted to apply for asylum in France but whose sister, her two children and husband, were trying to cross the France–UK border at Calais, explained how he was going to follow their journey step-by-step, and that this made him feel like a smuggler, checking for safety but also controlling their movement. Similarly to African refugees in Italy who used their phones to share with other migrants news of imminent threats of police roundups (Harney, 2013), activists and residents in Calais used mobiles to alert residents of imminent police raids. On 14 October 2016, we saw activists going around the camp alerting residents of a forthcoming raid on ‘commercial’ sites. This was often done via WhatsApp, a cross-platform instant messaging application for smartphones users that is less subject to monitoring and surveillance than other social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter (Gillepsie et al, 2016:24). An activist read aloud text messages to small groups of migrants alerting them that security forces were about to arrive. In response, shops’ curtains were drawn, a television standing in the corner of a restaurant was removed and customers left the premises, returning only after activists had informed them that the anticipated raid was not going to take place on that day.

Access to mobile technologies can also have negative impacts for security. While mobile technologies enable the exercise of belonging and the reconfiguration of political subjectivities and modes of citizenship, they also generate new forms of insecurity, surveillance and control of everyday life (Siapera, 2011). In addition to economic, social, and political precarity, forced migrants experience a more specific category of information precarity, in which their access to news as well as personal information is insecure, unstable, and unreliable, leading to potential threats to their wellbeing (Wall et al., 2015). As phone cameras are more and more used for ‘citizen witnessing’ they become dangerous objects that need to be placed under surveillance. In Calais, a notice posted on the door of a shop had a recognisable blue rectangle with the word ‘Facebook’ printed on it and underneath a warning sign:

BEWARE: Refugees and Volunteers - The UK Home Office will look at your Facebook account and they will use photos of you in Calais or other European countries to try and deport you. Be VERY careful about who you add, your profile pictures, what pictures you are tagged in/who you tag and your privacy settings!

It also warns volunteers to

Be careful about what you put on Facebook! Consent is not only someone being happy to have their photo taken/face shown. It is also about knowing what is going to be done with the photo and what risks this involves both in the UK and in people’s home countries.

*Digital humanitarianism and activism*

If mobile technologies shape the ways in which refugees and activists operate, they also alter the ways in which aid is given, and shape interactions among volunteers and residents in the Jungle. These new types of digital ‘volunteer humanitarianism’ (Sandri, 2017) are heavily reliant on online social networking sites, which are instrumental in galvinising support and mobilising volunteers and activists. They form networks and online communities of solidarity that are highly flexible, spontaneous and mobile.

Technology, in particular the social networking site Facebook, facilitates information sharing about the needs, the creation of projects and the coordination of operations among these informal, mixed networks of volunteers, activists and camp residents. An online analysis of digital volunteer humanitarian sites (in October 2016, before the camp was dismantled) showed that there were more than 85 English language Facebook pages of groups containing the word ‘Calais’ or ‘Jungle’.

These virtual platforms of solidarity, action, compassion, volunteering, care and aid are both national sites and locally-based solidarity groups. Given the lack of infrastructure and facilities in the Jungle, coordination of aid took place online as well as offline in the provision of medical equipment and medicines, the delivery and preparation of food in the ‘Calais Kitchen’, or the provision of suitable shelter via the Caravans for Calais mobile crisis support units. Volunteers and residents used Facebook pages to coordinate specific activities such as ‘Clean the Calais Jungle’, or ‘Calais Jungle waste and sanitation group’. Facebook pages also give us a glimpse of the targeted projects for women or children in ‘The “unofficial” women and children’s center’, which was located in a blue double-decker bus near the family area of the camp, or the ‘Hummingbird Project’ for children. Activists used Facebook to call for demonstrations such as ‘Calais – No Eviction Without Solution’, ‘Calais Calling’ or ‘Hunger Strike Calais’. Finally, in spite of the dangers of making one’s presence in Calais known, residents set up their own sites, like ‘Riaz 4 Calais’ and ‘Calais Voices of Refugees’, where they gave updates on the conditions in the camp. Since the Jungle was demolished, transit migrants are still congregating at the Calais border and therefore some groups of volunteers that were active in the camp continue to be active at the border. Refugees who have moved to some localities in France and those who have made it to the UK also continue to keep their Facebook pages active.

Digital humanitarianism is also visible in the ways in which mobile technologies (phones, phone credits) become technologies of aid. The most exemplary case is that of ‘Phone credit for refugees and displaced people’[[2]](#endnote-2), which was set up in February 2016 by a British volunteer who had been in Calais. This was at first an online only network gathering for the refugees, friends and volunteers who the group founder had met at the camp. The site quickly became an online platform allowing refugees, administrators and phone credit donors to interact with each other. The Facebook page reported that in October 2016 the group had 27,140 members and 27 administrators. By the end of January 2017, the service had recently completed 20,000 top-ups and raised almost £500,000. Since the dismantling of the Calais Jungle in October 2016, this platform has expanded its support to cover refugees across Europe and the Middle East[[3]](#endnote-3). This digital fundraising platform, which is a shared space between refugees, donors and administrators, gives vital credit phone to refugees in crisis to help them to connect with their loved ones, gain access to vital services, news and information and to keep themselves safe.

*The mobile phone as the most precious possession: the emergence of mobile-centred economies and infrastructures*

We also observed the emergence, in response to the spontaneous and informal nature of the Calais Jungle, of economies and infrastructures that revolve around the needs of mobile phone users and consumers. This is an under-researched dimension of the relationship between mobile technologies and forced migration, where in addition to the impact of mobile technologies on the lives of forced migrants in transit and those around them, we also observed the creation of mobile-focused economies and temporary infrastructures that support the electric and Wi-Fi systems.

In the volatile camp environment, forced migrants cannot risk that their phone battery runs out or their phone breaks down. Spaces which are usually associated with recreation, learning and sociability, such as the Afghan Restaurant, the Kids’ Café and The Jungle Library, were therefore transformed into communal charging spots, where it was possible to charge devices for free. Refugees could connect to a wireless network called ‘Jangala’, beamed into the camp from a hand-built antenna sitting atop a battered blue track, called the Refugee Info Bus[[4]](#endnote-4). This innovative mobile tech hub provided 150 individuals a day with a free Wi-Fi connection. A lack of access to electricity lines and a reliance on generators meant that electricity was a precious commodity whose scarcity posed the possibility of considerable tensions.

The need for technology generated a market in the Jungle for smartphone infrastructure support. On shop counters Lycamobile prepaid phone cards, SIM cards, headphones, chargers and second-hand phone batteries were sold beside tomatoes, oil, bread and cigarettes. In the Jungle, residents could buy monthly connectivity, purchasing 12 GB of data for around £20. Interestingly, some of this memory data was transferred from abroad when relatives residing in the UK sent Calais residents digital remittances to be exchanged for cash to purchase food and clothes in the informal camp market. In the absence of banks or Western Union shops, mobile data complemented or replaced traditional money transfers. Horst (2006b) writes that the receipt of remittances via smartphones has changed in significant ways: the mobile phone has made it easier to receive money regularly but also for specific purposes; money can be received on an occasional basis as well as in emergencies.

In the context of Calais, we see a further transformation whereby technological connectivity becomes the remittance per se, replacing money that cannot be withdrawn in the absence of identity documents, access to banks and availability of money transfer shops. Our research shows that technological connectivity is also the means through which family members in the diaspora support refugees in the camp. The existence of a second-hand Information Technology (IT) market also suggests quite strongly that there is a need for maintenance services. We saw evidence of this in examples like a handwritten sign on the outside door of one of the shops selling IT items, which read ‘phone repair’ and underneath ‘phone unlock’ with French contact details (first name and mobile number). Smartphones have thus become a ‘form of currency’, which can be bought and sold, traded and upgraded, exchanged for goods, stolen, lost and found (Gillespie et al., 2016).

*The digital intersectional divide*

As mobile technologies become more diffused among migrants and refugees, they also create new kinds of inequalities and challenges. Differential access to mobile technologies creates new forms of digital and social stratification. Gender and generational differences in refugee experiences of smartphones are rarely touched upon but are of great significance (Gillespie et al., 2016).

In Calais, on one side of the spectrum were those like Mohammed, an Afghan translator, who owned two mobile handsets with two separate SIM cards, a French and a UK one. Like others, Mohammed was sufficiently digitally literate to know that (at that time) it was cheaper to access the internet with a UK SIM card than a French one, and that the use of two SIM cards and sometimes more than one phone was a cost-reducing strategy. Forced migrants thus became active agents in negotiating the complexities of the tele-communication techno-border-space while also creating a transnational, cross-border market for UK SIM cards to be used in French territory.

One the other side of the fragmented digital world, a gender divide appears, with women in Calais tending to own basics phones, such as candy bar models, rather than the smartphones that men, especially young men, tended to own. For women, communication took place via text messages and calls made after having purchased €5 Lycamobile pre-paid phone cards on sale in the Jungle shops. However, smart phones are also shared within family units with the person (often the youngest and the men) being the most digitally literate and the ones in charge of keeping the others informed. There is also a generational divide, such as is seen in the story of an older Kuwaiti migrant. He had been in Calais for a year when we met him and was unable to communicate with his family because his old mobile phone did not have enough memory to upload new applications such as Viber. National inequalities are also visible. As mentioned earlier, not all migrants have smartphones and virtual online lives. Research has found that on the Balkan route, Syrians tend to have the most money and the best technology while Afghans, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Eritreans and Somalis are among the poorest, and their journeys are usually the toughest, with little help from internet resources (McLaughlin, 2015).

We also observed that there were different types of phones among migrants from different countries, with Sudanese, Eritrean, Ethiopian and Somali migrants being less likely to have smartphones than migrants from the Middle East. This trend intersected with age and gender. Migrants and refugees also experienced a stratified ‘mobility regime’ (Shamir, 2005) in which access to mobile technology is unstable and characterised by frequent periods of disconnection, and thus creating or reinforcing digital inequalities. In fact, pre-existing digital inequalities in terms of access, usage, skills, and self-perceptions can reinforce social inequalities between refugees while on the move and in the camp.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, we adopted a comprehensive approach to examine the role of mobile technologies during forced migration, which we refer to as mobile technologies for belonging and survival. Our ethnographic research in Calais shows the pivotal role of mobile technologies in forced migrants’ lives in rapidly changing techno-border-scapes and contributes to our understanding of an emerging, currently under-researched dimension of the migrant experience. In the informal Calais camp, mobile technologies were used as multi-functional devices that overlap with all aspects – survival, practical, affective, economic, social and political – of forced migrants’ lives, combining both technologies for belonging and survival.

We looked at migrant's agencies through the complex use of mobile technologies not by migrant themselves in isolation, but within 'techno-border-scapes' in which a range social actors, including transit migrants, are embedded. We explored the ways in which the environment alters the uses of mobile technologies among refugees, and how mobile technologies can facilitate migrant's journeys while simultaneously constraining them. We also examined the new interfaces created by mobile technologies that allow for new types of social interactions to take place among different social actors who do not necessarily share the same motives. The ongoing transformation of the use of mobile technologies by forced migrants embedded in techno-border-scapes needs to be studied contextually, across time and space.

By focusing on migrant’s agencies at the Calais border, we were able to reveal a complex interplay between mobile technologies for survival and belonging and the formation of digital sociabilities and infrastructures. We attempted to avoid falling into the trap of technological determinism, which either offers a glowing picture of what technologies can bring to refugees or a dark vision of how technologies are being used to ‘manage’ and ‘control’ the flow of refugees in Europe. We showed that differentiated access to mobiles technologies and their use among national and social groups differently shapes the experiences of migrants in the camp and can provide opportunities, but can also reinforce inequalities.

Future research needs to better understand complex emerging forms of digital division in migration, and we suggest that adopting an intersectional lens that looks simultaneously at racial, geographic, gender, class, and age divides may represent a way forward.

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1. For more details on the ‘Life Stories’ project: https://www.uel.ac.uk/schools/social-sciences/our-research-and-engagement/research/centre-for-narrative-research/collaborative-research-events/life-stories-at-the-jungle-refugee-camp-calais [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.facebook.com/groups/1709109339334305/ [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Since October 2016, new members have seen the Facebook group almost triple in size with almost 60,000 members at the end of September 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <http://refugeeinfobus.com/>. The organisation became involved in Greece in early 2017 and it plans to get involved in the north of France as refugees are still there. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)