Telecommunications across borders: refugees' technology use during displacement

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Abstract

This article reports on recent research examining refugees as a particular user group of communication technologies. The term 'refugee' refers to all people who are exposed to refugee-type experiences and may include displaced people, asylum seekers and resettled refugees who have been granted residency in Australia. A review of literature has found that refugees as technology users have had very little attention across different disciplines, although the research has shown that technology is key to sustaining emotional wellbeing and precarious connections with family members when displaced. In particular, the telephone is the most critical technology for refugees in terms availability and familiarity. However, the access and affordability of telecommunications services and other technologies during displacement impacts on refugees' adoption and use of technology in the settlement process.

Keywords

Refugees, telecommunications, technology use, displacement

Introduction

This article reports on recent research examining refugees as a particular user group of communication technologies. The term 'refugee' refers to all people who are exposed to refugee-type experiences and may include displaced people, asylum seekers and resettled refugees who have been granted residency in Australia. A review of literature has found that refugees as technology users have had very little attention across different disciplines, although the research has shown that technology is key to sustaining emotional wellbeing and precarious connections with family members when displaced. In particular, the telephone is the most critical technology for refugees in terms availability and familiarity. However, the access and affordability of telecommunications services and other technologies during displacement impacts on refugees' adoption and use of technology in the settlement process.

What follows is an analysis of the issues surrounding refugees' technology use as identified in the literature, including the pilot study which was published as a monograph *Technology's Refuge* (Leung, Finney Lamb and Emrys 2009), concluding with ideas and recommendations generated by refugee communities and settlement service providers about how best address these issues.

Literature review

The disciplines of Cultural Studies and Global Studies have studied transnational migrants' use of technologies, such as the internet (Graham & Khosravi 2002; Karim 2003; Parham 2004; Bernal 2006), phone cards (Vertovec 2004; Wilding 2006) and mobile phones (Horst 2006). However, there has been minimal consideration of the specific importance of technology to refugees, who are similarly affected by issues of migration and marginalisation. While migrants generally exploit cheap access to communication technologies to sustain connection with familial and diasporic networks abroad (Baldassar et al 2007), refugees as a subset of this group, do not have the same opportunities as a result of being displaced and uncertain of the whereabouts of their loved ones. Overall, the study of communities and communication practices that surround particular technologies has concentrated on groups other than refugees. A review of literature across both these disciplines has shown the study of:

- technology use by refugees has had minimal investigation;
- the familial and diasporic networks of transnational migrants has infrequently included refugees;
- communities and communication practices that surround particular technologies has concentrated on groups other than refugees.

Although the study of refugees is a discipline in its own right, there has been minimal examination of the role of technology in maintaining connections with family and diaspora in situations of displacement and resettlement. Instead, the literature within Refugee Studies is generally in the areas of:

- systems of immigration administration, such as comparison of different methods of managing refugees, particularly between Australia and the UK, Canada and the USA (see Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission 2004);
- how such systems inform public attitudes towards refugees (see Kushner & Knox 1999; MacCallum 2002; Mares 2002, McMaster 2002);
- the provision of basic health and education services to refugees (see Preston 1991; Hodes 2002; Mares & Jureidini 2003) including the treatment of the psychological

effects of family displacement and separation (see Nickerson 2008; Johnson & Stoll 2008; Luster et al. 2009; Senyurekli & Detzner 2008).

The few studies that have been undertaken concentrate on the use of a range of technologies by refugees living in resettlement countries. For example, Kabbar and Crump (2006) examined the adoption of the information and communiction technologies (ICTs) by refugee immigrants in New Zealand. McIver Jr and Prokosch (2002) explored how various technologies are used for information-seeking by immigrants and refugees in the United States. De Leeuw and Rydin (2007) have conducted research on the ways refugee children represent their cultural identities in the creation of their own media productions. Research which has focused on specific technologies include Howard and Owens' (2002) study of the internet as a medium for communicating health information to refugee groups. Luster et al. (2009) acknowledged the critical importance of the telephone in reconnecting Sudanese refugees in the United States with their lost families in Africa. Glazebrook (2004) has explored mobile phone use amongst refugees on Temporary Protection Visas in Australia. Akuei (2005) has studied how kinship rights of Dinka refugees are enacted through the telephone. Such studies explore how technologies are used where access to and literacies in those technologies is assumed to be unproblematic and does not fundamentally affect communication practices. Nonetheless, the latter studies point to the key role of telecommunications technologies in the lives of refugees.

The findings of the pilot study reported in *Technology's Refuge* (Leung, Finney Lamb and Emrys 2009) confirm that the phone is the main technology used to maintain vulnerable connections with family members in situations of conflict, displacement and resettlement. As a result, availability, access and affordability of phone services are fundamental to refugees' emotional wellbeing. The role of technologies in promoting wellbeing has been explored in Eardley, Bruce and Goggin's (2009) review of literature on telecommunications services for disadvantaged groups; O'Mara's (2009) study of using ICTs to empower culturally and linguistically diverse communities; Infoxchange and A.T. Kearney's (2010) report on digital inclusion as a means to social cohesion in low-income areas; Metcalf et al's (2008) article on connecting marginalized young people through technology; and various other studies of how feelings of trust, intimacy and community are promoted online (Preece 1998; Abdul-Rahman & Hailes 2000; Kadende-Kaiser 2000; Henderson & Gilding 2004). Such studies of the ways that technology can facilitate individual and community wellbeing have not particularly focused on refugees, and where migrants have been studied, it is usually in the context of settlement with those who are advantaged in their capacity to voluntarily undertake economic migration.

Methodology

Technology's Refuge analysed 30 interviews and 43 surveys with refugees and asylum seekers about their use of communication technology across the contexts of displacement, detention and resettlement. Participants included:

- male and female refugees or asylum seekers; participants from different regions of the world, including Africa, the Balkans, Asia and the Middle East;
- refugees resettled in the Australian community;
- former asylum seekers who had been detained within immigration detention centres;
- adults as well as those who arrived as child refugees.

Therefore, it is one of the few studies to explore refugees' communication technology use in displacement contexts, and one of the first to do this in relation to detention centre environments.

As *Technology's Refuge* was a pilot study and exploratory in nature, it was important to verify the findings following the launch of the report. Refugee communities, advocates, international non-government organisations, resettlement services and researchers were invited to a community workshop that would disseminate the report's findings and identify potential solutions and actions that will support refugees and asylum seekers' use of communication technologies in displacement settings and during resettlement in Australia. The workshop focused on the experience of refugees and asylum seekers from Eastern and Western Africa. Participants came from a variety of backgrounds, including six participants from African nations.

A2-sized posters were created to summarise the key findings of the report as it related to three central questions. These were used as talking points and to guide discussion on the day. One of the key questions, discussed further below, was 'How can we help refugees communicate during war, in flight and in refugee camps?'.

Discussion

Workshop participants who had lived in countries in Africa generally agreed that the challenges summarised in *Technology's Refuge* and the workshop posters were ones they or members of their communities had faced.

While displaced, access to technologies was hampered by war and damaged or diminished telecommunications infrastructures. Access to the most basic of technologies, such as phone

and postal services, was also compromised by the cost to use them. The demand to use these communication technologies led to the formation of micro-economies, in which use and access was possible only through personal or professional contacts, and/or payment. Participants highlighted the vital role of the phone for staying in contact with family, and informing them of their family's whereabouts and safety during displacement and flight. These participants indicated that the phone was the primary means of staying in touch and it was difficult to remain in contact without it. However, the opportunities for learning modern technologies in Africa could be particularly limited. For example, several participants from African countries only became phone-literate after arriving in Australia.

The following table is a simplified overview of one of the posters presented at the workshop, and which served as a prompt for discussion.

COMMUNICATION CHALLENGE	ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES AND STORIES
Challenge 1: Access in refugee camps: Some camps had no public phone. Mobile phones were owned only by the 'wealthy' few. Poor mobile network coverage made receiving incoming calls difficult. It was difficult to earn money in the camp to afford to communicate.	*'People who owned mobile phones rented them out.'* *'If I wanted to call someone, I had to stand on top of the hill.'* *'I relied on my landlord to access a phone to receive my husband's calls.'*
Challenge 2: Postal services in refugee camps: Some camps have no postal service.	*'If you have no money to buy the stamp, you just give it to someone who is going there. But will it reach them?'* *'The Red Cross hand-delivered letters with emergency supplies'.*
Challenge 3: Affordability: Some people could not afford to own a phone. It was difficult to earn money in refugee camps to be able to afford to communicate.	*'If you have no money to buy the stamp, you just give it to someone who is going there. But will it reach them?'* *'We had a two way radio in the office and it was free.'*
Challenge 4: Communicating on the run: Whilst in flight, refugees wanted to let their family know that they were alive and safe. The public phone is a common way to communicate while fleeing. There is limited money and few calls.	*'When we arrived in Jordan, we contacted our family to tell them we were safe, then again when we reached Malaysia and again in Indonesia.'*
Challenge 5: Surveillance: Some people	*'I didn't even write a letter, I did not feel it*

were worried that their family or friends were under surveillance by their enemies. They feared the post could be intercepted or phone calls recorded.	*was safe for them.'* *'I wasn't saying where I was because we were scared that the government was listening.'*
Challenge 6: Staying connected to family: Some refugees could not communicate with their family because no-one had a phone. Some participants lost touch with family members if they went into hiding. Refugees can feel distressed if there is no news.	*'I have a sister who visited from Khartoum. She's the one who knew where my parents were.'* *'If someone comes to visit Khartoum from our area, we all come to ask whether our parents are alive – you don't even know.'* *'I heard rumours about where the rest of my family had gone, but I had no way to contact them.'*
Challenge 7: Disconnected phone lines: Phone lines and infrastructure can be destroyed by war. Government bans on communication can stop people using the phone.	*'During the war, they had to go to a special place to call us, because all the lines were disconnected.'*
Challenge 8: Unreliable postal systems: People did not know whether or not their letters would arrive.	*'A man in our community travels a lot. When he's coming you will see him with heaps of letters, when he's going, heaps of letters.'* *'I didn't write letters because the post was bad: the letter might go or not go.'*
Challenge 9: Internet 'access': In some places internet cafes are too expensive to use. Some people could only access emails through work. Not many other people use email.	*'I can't send emails to those people; they can't read it. They don't know how to use computers...'*
Challenge 10: When technology fails: Sometimes refugees cannot access any technology.	*Messengers were used to pass on news and hand-deliver letters to them. Sometimes they are paid.* *Sometimes going to visit family and friends is the only way to communicate.*

Specifically in relation to communication practices whilst fleeing and displaced from their home countries, workshop participants observed that communication becomes a driving need as important as basic shelter, food and water. Communication technologies that enable refugees to find lost family, communicate with them, inform family and friends of their needs

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and receive financial assistance can act as a vital lifeline. At the workshop, participants further elaborated on issues of access, affordability, surveillance, limited and damaged infrastructure, and staying connected to family.

Participants also identified two additional challenges at the workshop: using communication technology to arrange monetary transfers and being at the mercy of the black market.

Access: In refugee camps that were covered by a telecommunications network, mobile phones provided the main means of communicating. Participants commented that in the camps they had resided in, only a few people had a mobile phone in their possession. Camp residents will occasionally hire mobile phones from others. Furthermore**,** some refugee camps do not have telecommunications networks that link the camp to other regions. In these situations, access to communications is very poor. Satellite phones or radios play a critical role, but are usually too expensive for displaced persons. Refugees may travel to town to make a phone call, if camp policies allow.

Participants who had lived in refugee camps said how they would travel to town to meet a variety of communication needs; for example, to visit the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office, to send a telegram, to receive money transferred to them or to access a landline phone to make a call. The dangers and inconveniences of travelling to town from refugee camps were described: extreme heat, long distances, bad roads and the risk of attack by bandits. One refugee camp was three days walk from town. Once in town, refugees have to contend with a limited communication system, which may involve queuing at phone booths or dealing with jammed telephone lines that prevent you getting through. Often the expense and effort of travelling into town is wasted.

Affordability: Residents within refugee camps found it difficult to afford to communicate. Money might be found by doing manual labor, borrowing money from a friend or receiving financial assistance from outside the camp. Some people are only able to afford to use communication technologies because family members outside the camp pay, for example, by sending money to buy a mobile phone or by 'phoning in' and paying for the calls. The difficulties faced in finding money to communicate increased people's disappointment when an attempt to communicate was unsuccessful, for example, if the phone was cut off or they reached voicemail and their money was gone. One participant recounted a story where he had borrowed money from a friend to make a phone call which wasn't successful and had to find a way to pay this money back after he had made the call.

Staying connected: During conflict and flight, people easily lose each other. Attacks happen unexpectedly and fleeing can occur in a chaotic manner. After separation, family members struggle to find each other again and reunite. It takes a particularly long time to find a family member who has travelled overseas. Participants described the anxiety displaced people experience waiting for news when they don't know where their family members are, or whether or not they are still alive. One participant recounted a story about a radio station that acted as a 'missing link' between family members, after the telecommunications link between the town and main centre had been destroyed. Community members paid to register their name and location with the radio station. A printout of this information was used to help family members locate each other.

Surveillance: Community members, who fear they will be traced by the government they had fled, find it difficult to talk about 'exactly what's on the heart' with friends and family. There is strict scrutiny over communication into some countries; phones are tapped and certain lines restricted. A comment was made that a West African government had been known to disrupt and destroy some communication methods.

Limited and damaged infrastructure: There are still some areas in Africa where there are no telecommunications services or postal addresses. People travel to see those with whom they want to communicate by foot or donkey cart. Satellite phones are an important option in these areas, but are too expensive for the ordinary person.

Some participants had experiences where they were unable to get through to the person they were trying to call because the phone lines were jammed. Participants commented that phone connections are regularly cut off, and that the strength of the network signal overseas is weak. The lack of a reliable or steady source of electricity in the recipient's country can be a major problem, although this will vary by region. Growing populations in some areas weakens network connectivity, as more people requires more power. Individuals may also have difficulty accessing electricity to charge their mobile phones.

Participants had also experienced intrusion in communication. Communication lines had been crossed, so that participants could hear other voices on the line, and phone calls had gone through to the wrong country. Participants believed that this problem lay with the service provider.

One participant described the difficulties she had in contacting her husband in a camp. She sent money to him to buy a mobile phone so that they could communicate, but other people in

the camp would also use his phone. Subsequently, she would have to call repeatedly and wait for hours to get in touch.

Family members who are living in different places can lose touch when the telecommunications infrastructure is destroyed, or when a family member, who is not contactable by phone, loses a telephone number.

Monetary transfers: Refugees and other displaced persons need to securely receive money transfers from family and friends. Whilst the Internet is a reliable way to send money from account to account, this is too expensive for people in Africa. Therefore, this normally has to be done through a third party such as a broker, the Western Union or a bank in town. These organizations charge a fee for their service. One of the workshop participants recounted a situation during the war in which official 'organizational' infrastructures had collapsed and all communication with their family and money transfers had to be done through a Somali broker who owned a satellite phone.

There is no direct way of transferring money to the recipients in refugee camps. If transferring money to a family member or friend in a refugee camp, there is a need to phone them to let them know it can be collected. Collection can involve a trip to town or finding someone who can pick up the money from the capital city. Inefficiencies in money transfers between financial organisations can result in the trip to town being unfruitful, with the displaced person returning to a disappointed and desperate family.

The black market: Displaced people are at the mercy of those who can afford to own communication technology and who control access to it. The expense of using communication technology can markedly increase when the owners of mobile phones in refugee camps become corrupt or phone booths in town are controlled by the black market.

Proposed solutions

A brainstorm of initiatives or actions that could be undertaken in refugee camps and other types of displacement settings generated the following project ideas. The feasibility and merits of each idea could not be fully assessed during the workshop. Therefore, these project ideas are presented for further analysis and development.

Centralised communication system

Workshop participants proposed that a centralised communications system be established within camps with one professional and accountable service provider. In certain locations this would necessitate the building of infrastructure. In addition, a communication room could also be set up to provide displaced people with access to phones. Additionally, an internet café could be set up which could provide access to email and internet/VoIP. Training would need to be delivered to residents in the camp so that they were able to use available technologies, such as computers. Participants suggested that priority use be given to linking displaced people with their family members, especially if the whereabouts of immediate family were not known. A user-fee could be levied to cover the operation costs. However, this would necessitate non-government organisations (NGOs) providing a means by which residents in the camp could earn an income, for example, by offering skills training and the opportunity to engage in trades, or microloans that enable displaced people to establish small businesses in camps.

Participants argued that a central communications system would help protect vulnerable people from being preyed on by the black market and discourage the proliferation of corrupt communication businesses. It would also enable better management and policing of legitimate small communications businesses within the camp. If a single telecommunications service provider was introduced, it would give NGOs the legitimacy to institute rules that govern the use of all telecommunication services within the camp. Some participants also expressed a view that it would be unjust to eliminate corrupt businesses without first providing an alternative means of communication for desperate people in need of family contact. A centralised communication system would be less costly than other alternatives and could eliminate the need for refugees to travel into town to meet their communication needs.

This, however, would not be without the danger of misuse. A central communications room could make it easier for spies from former governments or enemy groups to track down individuals who reside in the camp. If political information or conversations were transmitted on a central communications link, it could place the humanitarian organisation in a bad light. Security is a primary concern in refugee camps and communication systems are not exempt.

Participants recommended that a governance structure for communications be put in place to protect it against misuse, and to uphold the principles of impartiality and neutrality. For example, rules which specify that the communications room be used only for personal communication could be introduced. Refugees who use the communication system would need to be cautioned that political information should not be transmitted.

Participants proposed that a pilot model for a communication room, which is scalable so that it can be rolled out to other refugee camps, be trialled and evaluated. A pilot project would demonstrate proof of concept, and provide a platform on which to lobby for communication capabilities to be introduced into other refugee camps. Its evaluation could provide tangible evidence to support funding applications for similar projects. Participants recommended that such a pilot project be conducted under the auspices of an organisation specifically set up to provide technology aid for refugee camps, by administering communication technology projects. This would establish an organisational infrastructure through which similar projects could be initiated once the pilot study is complete.

Micro-finance loans for small communications businesses

Micro-finance loans could be provided to individual refugees or households in refugee camps to help them establish a small communication business, for example, by renting out mobile phones or satellite radios. This would improve access to telephone services within refugee camps, particularly where there is no other communication service.

Satellite radios

Satellite radios could be provided in refugee camps where there is no mobile telephone network coverage. The provision of UHF/VHF radio communication facilities to refugees in the camp could potentially facilitate communication between friends and relatives in internally displaced people's (IDP) camps because the UHF/VHF radio has wide network coverage. A system could be set up where a simple message is delivered to a similar communication facility in another IDP camp and the message delivered to the relative and friend. Participants also suggested that radio messages could be used to locate missing persons.

Purchasing airtime

Participants proposed that a project be established through which airtime on mobile phones could be purchased from anywhere in the world for refugees in Africa. They noted that the establishment of relationships between community groups in refugee camps and groups in Australia and the United States may enable such a project to occur. Further subsidies also could be achieved by negotiating cheaper deals with telecommunications providers for technology aid.

Letter delivery

One small group of participants suggested that the drivers of vehicles who regularly drop food off to camps could deliver letters or money transfers. Security concerns were not discussed. This type of arrangement may be particularly beneficial for improving access to communication technologies in camps where there are no telecommunications links between the camp and the outside world. The direct delivery of letters to refugee camps would also be facilitated through the provision of post office boxes.

Support for family reunion

Comments were made that NGO coordination is vital for maximising the effectiveness of systems which have been set up to find missing persons. Competition between NGOs could potentially stifle the coordination required to identify missing persons and send messages to them.

Advocacy and education

Workshop participants recommended that the communication needs of displaced peoples be acknowledged as a central requirement, alongside the provision of food, water and shelter. They noted that humanitarian organisations do not adequately address the needs that displaced people experience as a result of being separated from their family. As one workshop participant expressed it, these are their 'most meaningful' needs.

Sustained advocacy is needed for the provision of communication centres to become a standardised feature in humanitarian assistance. Participants suggested that advocates consider whether they should lobby for communication needs to be incorporated into the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response Standards (SPHERE standards).

Conclusion

Little is known about the use of communication technologies in situations of displacement in developing and/or war torn countries. Various factors inhibited access to technologies while participants were dislocated: including war and violence leading to damaged telecommunications infrastructures and poor coverage as well as government sanctions on telecommunications in periods of conflict. In this context, affordable infrastructure solutions are likely to aid communication. Mobile phones had the utility of facilitating communication in situations of conflict or dislocation, particularly, in refugee camps and in rural or regional settings that do not have basic telecommunications infrastructure. However, while the mobile phone is versatile, its limitations are clear: they are expensive, can potentially be lost, may not

be able to be used in a different national network when asylum seekers flee across national borders and can be dependent on vulnerable mobile network stations in conflict zones. Satellite phones may be the only way of contacting family when telecommunication infrastructure is damaged. Nevertheless, mobile phones can ensure that family members remain contactable during flight and displacement and may protect a family member's whereabouts from being lost. Participant accounts indicated that letters are a fallback communication method in displacement settings where telecommunication services fail. However, these can be limited by the unreliability of the postal services and the threat of surveillance by enemies.

Humanitarian assistance in facilitating access to communication technology is likely to ameliorate distress and help prevent the separation of families. Humanitarian agencies could potentially have a role in the emergency delivery of letters and facilitating community access to satellite phones. Participant accounts highlighted the difficulties in communicating to the outside world from refugee camps that had limited communication services. In these settings, these agencies might effectively intervene by supporting 'indigenous schemes' for resource sharing, for example, sharing a mobile phone whilst each individual owns a SIM card. There is a role for humanitarian actors to more effectively support refugees and asylum seekers in meeting their vital communication needs so that access to technologies is widened and no longer has to be negotiated on an ad hoc basis through brokers and favours.

The workshop generated a multitude of ideas, recommendations and project ideas. While not all could be actioned, participants and readers are welcome to appropriate them in the provision of services to their communities or clients. They are summarized below:
- pilot and evaluate a model for a communication room, which is scalable so that it can be rolled out to other refugee camps**;**
- provide micro-finance loans to establish small communications businesses within refugee camps;
- provide satellite radios in refugee camps where there is no mobile telephone network coverage;
- establish schemes for purchasing airtime on mobile phones or other technologies from anywhere in the world for refugees in Africa;
- negotiate cheap deals with telecommunications providers as a form of technology aid;
- facilitate direct delivery of letters to refugee camps through the provision of post office boxes. Drivers of vehicles who regularly drop food off to camps could be an additional means of delivering letters or money transfers;

- support family reunion by using radio messages to locate missing persons.
- engage in sustained advocacy for the communication needs of displaced peoples as a standardised feature in humanitarian assistance.

Acknowledgements

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