

Communication rights from the margins: politicising young refugees' smartphone pocket archives

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Abstract

Politicising the smartphone pocket archives and experiences of 16 young refugees living in the Netherlands, this explorative study re-conceptualises and empirically grounds communication rights. The focus is on the usage of social media among young refugees, who operate from the margins of society, human rights discourse and technology. I focus on digital performativity as a means to address unjust communicative power relations and human right violations. Methodologically, I draw on empirical data gathered through a mixed-methods, participatory action fieldwork research approach. The empirical section details how digital practices may invoke human right ideals including the human right to self-determination, the right to self-expression, the right to information, the right to family life and the right to cultural identity. The digital performativity of communication rights becomes meaningful when fundamentally situated within hierarchical and intersectional power relations of gender, race, nationality among others, and as inherently related to material conditions and other basic human rights including access to shelter, food, well-being and education.

Keywords

Communication rights, digital archives, Europe, human rights, margins, performativity, pocket archives, refugee youth, smartphones, The Netherlands

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Waarom kan ik niet zeggen wat ik wil?
 Why can't i say what i want?
 'أريد؟ ما قول أسـتطيع لا لماذا أريد؟ ما قول أسـتطيع لا لماذا'
 (Zeinah, 19-year-old Syrian-Dutch young woman).

Politicising the smartphone pocket archives of young refugees, this article re-conceptualises and empirically grounds communication rights from the margins. 'Why can't I say what I want', this was the Facebook status update of Zeinah – a 19-year-old Syrian-Dutch young woman – posted on her personal Facebook profile in Dutch, Arabic and English in May 2015, as a way to reflect on her politicised everyday life in relation to the Netherlands, back home in Syria and the English speaking news media. Alongside expressions of repression commonly felt among Syrians in the digital diaspora (Moss, 2016), Zeinah published Facebook life-events including 'started working at student' as she enrolled in a preparatory course to study Medicine in 2016. 'We're in the Netherlands', this is the geo-located announcement Zeinah put on her personal Facebook profile in July 2014. In the posting, she tagged her brother who travelled with her, adding an elated emoticon and indicating she 'felt excited', about her post. With this posting, she alerted her friends and family overseas she safely passed the Mediterranean Sea by boat and managed to travel overland to north-western Europe.

Zeinah's periodic Facebook status updates illustrate how contemporary young forced migrants – who have grown up using information and communication technologies (ICT's) like social media and smartphones – digitally make claims for their human rights. Two weeks later, she shared an image containing a Wi-Fi icon with the caption 'HOME IS WHERE Wifi connects automatically', reflecting her desires for making a new home in the Netherlands. In the following months, Zeinah frequently shared news from Al Jazeera, other news agencies and activists about atrocities in Syria (e.g., by using the hashtag #WithSyria) and Syrian refugees drowning on their way to Europe: 'i know what exactly feels. One line between life and death...'. In February 2015, she posted about her home town of Douma, a suburb located 10 km to the northeast of Damascus in the Ghouta green belt which surrounds the capital. She shared material from the '#Douma_Exterminated' social media campaign, initiated by activists after the Syrian regime shelled the town, killing hundreds of civilians, including children and aid workers. The hashtag documenting graphic images of shelling, casualties, deaths and destruction was widely shared on Twitter and re-posted on other social media platforms, questioning why the world was focusing on Islamic State violence and turning a blind eye towards the atrocities committed by the Syrian regime (Kayto, 2015).

The digital archives of Zeinah and other young refugees¹ involved in this study are extremely significant. For the owners, selfies, videos, messages and personal profile pages are historical documentations of individual and collective experiences, feelings, traumas and aspirations. Emerging literature suggests that such portable digital archives can offer hope (Twigt, forthcoming 2017) and a sense of ontological security (Smets, forthcoming 2018). For outsiders, these ego-documents are rich

empirical data offering a glance at unimaginable personal trajectories. Of particular urgency for the present intervention, they are replete with articulations of social injustices and appeals to human rights.

Conceptually, these narrative practices can be conceived as distinct performative practices. Through cross-platform digital story telling practices young refugees share, like, post and ‘type themselves into being’ in various digital databases (Sundén, 2003). They create worlds and livelihoods through medium and platform-specific actions. The acts may have a certain political transformative potential, and in this article this potential will be conceptualised and empirically charted as the digital enactment of claims for communication rights.

Although the EU is premised on the slogan of ‘Unity in diversity’, the margins of Europe reveal a different, harsh reality. Migrant groups have bitterly contradictory experiences: although the groups are quite similar in size – the number of expatriates is estimated to reach 56.8 million by the end of 2017 (Finaccord, 2014), while globally over 65 million people were forcibly displaced in 2015 (United National Higher Commissioner of Refugees, 2016) – those travelling irregularly commonly experience hardship in particular in contrast with voluntary migrants, particularly highly skilled expatriates. While e-passports, iris scans and on-board airplane wireless Internet facilitate the lifestyle of the global (cosmopolitan?) elites zipping in and out of Europe, Europe remains the deadliest migration destiny in the world for forced migrants. In 2016, alongside 387,739 arrivals to Europe, 5098 people ‘died/went missing’, and as of August 16, alongside 124,863 arrivals 2,410 have ‘died/went missing’ (IOM, 2017). Nearly 2,000 official entry ports and 60,000 km of land and sea borders are increasingly managed through digital technologies, and refugees experience ‘smart borders’ entirely differently from expats. At the Mediterranean Sea, their phone signals may be traced by drones and satellites that are part of the European Border Surveillance System. Upon arrival, they may be physically coerced to have their fingerprints scanned so that an algorithm can decide upon their futures on the basis of the European Dactyloscopy biometric database. There are also important similarities, both voluntary and forced migrants are increasingly ‘connected migrants’ (Diminescu, 2008), who live in one place and use mobile devices and social media platforms to conduct their lives across the world. Although digital divides alongside the axes of race, gender, age, class persist – refugees are increasingly connected refugees: the UNHCR estimates over two-thirds of refugee households living in urban settings – which is the case for most forced migrants in Europe – have access to an Internet enabled phone (2016: 14).

Young refugees are connected migrants and actively contribute to transnational ‘digital diaspora’ formation (Gajjala, forthcoming 2018). This article makes an intervention in the media and migration literature by analysing digital practices and experiences of connected migrants through the analytic lens of communication rights. This normative and critical framework is oriented towards recognising agency, empowerment, dignity, family life and communicative freedom (Hamelink and Hoffman, 2008), which is of great importance to achieve a more

nanced understanding of the situation and experiences of forced migrants (Thomas, 2011). Connected migrants indeed may actively claim the right to engage in cosmopolitan, intercultural exchange but also to communicate, associate and preserve one's identity and family relations online – across borders and through devices and social media platforms they prefer.

In particular, I operationalise communication rights from the perspective of speech-act theory. From this perspective, young refugees may become 'performative right claiming-subjects' (Isin and Ruppert, 2015: 10) through engaging in digital practices like posting status updates, photos and videos or having transnational Skype or Viber video conversations that appeal to or invoke human right ideals. Illustrative case in point is the 8-year-old Bana Alabed. Managing the social media account @AlabedBana with her mother, she famously tweeted and vlogged about her experiences growing up in the civil war in Aleppo, Syria. As a refugee living in Turkey she currently asserts herself as a peace activist and refugee rights advocate. For example, on World refugee day, June 20, she posted a video in which she plead the 'world to be honest with refugees' (AlabedBana, 2017; see also Halasa, Omareen and Mahfoud, 2014). Time Magazine recognised her global impact and visibility and ranked her among one of 'the 25 most influential people on the internet' (Time Staff, 2017). As Engin Isin and Evelyn Ruppert argue some digital acts can be seen 'as a kind of speech act and means of social struggle', and they hypothesise recognising the multiplicity of such acts may reveal rights 'as not static or universal but historical and situated' (2015: 10–11). So far however, the digital performativity of rights is theorised as a universal possible process. Although strongly theorised, communication rights and digital performativity of right claims are little empirically sustained in situated power-ridden experiences of particular individuals and communities.

My intervention is aimed at the theoretical, methodological and empirical level, and the argument is structured according to these three aims. The first section, focused on 'law-in-books' (Rap, 2016: 147), addresses urgent conceptual gaps in the literature at the intersections of human rights, migration and ICTs. I seek to bring diverging fields into dialogue by rethinking communication rights from the perspective of the digital archives of refugee youth. Research on migration and digital media largely ignores human rights discourse as an analytic frame (notable exceptions are Costanza-Chock, 2014; Thomas, 2011; Witteborn, 2011), while human rights scholarship on migrants typically does not focus on the usage of digital technologies (Nicholls, 2013). Moreover, attention for the specific experiences of young people has only recently emerged in recent literature addressing either the intersections of migration and the Internet (Alinejad, 2017) or human rights and the Internet (Livingstone and Third, 2017). In the second section, I position my methodological reflections in response to previous research projects that have sought to empower refugee youth through external digital storytelling interventions. Aiming to combine creative, participatory and digital methodological techniques, I discuss how informants shared and co-researched with me

their smartphones as personal pocket archives. The third section focuses on ‘law-in-action’ (Rap, 2016: 147) and presents new and rich empirical data on the experiences of 16 young refugees from various backgrounds living in the Netherlands. It offers an extensive empirical analysis of their digital performativity through the lens of making communication rights claims.

Communication rights

Introducing communication rights

the time will come when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights will have to encompass a more extensive right than man’s right to information, first laid down – in Article 19. This is the right of man [sic] to communicate. This is the angle from which the future development of communication will have to be considered to be understood (Jean D’Arcy, 1969).

Jean D’Arcy introduced the notion of the right to communicate almost 50 years ago at the level of the United Nations. If attention for interaction and dialogue were to be institutionalised, it would result in a paradigm shift, as it would ‘go far beyond what is addressed by the traditional freedom of expression’ (Hamelink and Hoffman, 2008: 6). In response to D’Arcy’s call, UNESCO formulated and adopted resolutions at general conferences and expert meetings, and the final report of the UNESCO appointed MacBride Commission advised:

communication needs in a democratic society should be met by the extension of specific rights such as the right to be informed, the right to inform, the right to privacy, the right to participate in public communication – all elements of a new concept, the right to communicate. In developing what might be called a new era of social rights, we suggest all the implications of the right to communicate be further explored (UNESCO, 1981, p. 265).

Scholars and activists have noted the difficulties defining and delineating communication rights, as a result of the changing communication media landscape, distinctively located communicative practices and the great variety of actors involved including governments, states, NGOs, corporations, activists and citizens. For example, the MacBride report recognised the following ‘functions of communication’ that serve individuals and communities: information, socialisation, motivation, debate and discussion, education, cultural promotion, entertainment and integration (UNESCO, 1981: 14). In sum, there is no such thing as a universal definition but rather communication rights offer a critical vocabulary to map agency, with a focus on dialogue and exchange. As a future looking orientation, it offers a ‘scaffolding’ to map ‘communication deficits’ (Thomas, 2011: 5) to address and change unjust communicative power relations.

Legal underpinnings

It should be noted that the right to communicate disappeared from the UNESCO agenda in the early 1990s. Despite subsequent NGO rallying for communication rights in the early 2000s, international law thus does not yet provide for communication rights. There are however several underpinnings and bases for this project in the International Bill of Human Rights (Universal Declaration of Human Rights [UDHR] 1948; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966), the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) and of particular relevance for young forced migrants the UN Convention of the Child (1989). Nonetheless, human rights discourse is remarkably lagging behind in accounting for changing media and ICT environments. For example, the provision of free speech (UDHR article 19) centres mostly on the public domain, whereas the contemporary social media environment warrants greater greater attention for the private sphere. Furthermore, the interactive dynamics of the contemporary communication landscape are not addressed. As Fisher and Harms note, ‘the earlier statements of communications freedoms [...] implied that freedom of information was a one way right from a higher to a lower plane’ (1983: 9). Recent guidelines, for example, EU Human Rights Guidelines on Freedom of Expression Online and Offline argue that online practices are to be considered on par with offline dynamics: ‘All human rights that exist offline must also be protected online’ (European Council, 2014). However, as becomes clear from initiatives like WiFi4EU to provide Wi-Fi in public spaces across Europe (EU, 2016), the digital agenda of the EU remains principally concerned with stimulating citizen access to the ‘digital single market’ (European Commission, 2017). The scarce scholarly attention for rights in ICT saturated environments is currently dominated by ‘digital rights’ advocates and scholarship that foreground the provision, participation and protection of children in particular but pay little attention to social justice, interactivity or cultural specificity (Livingstone and Bulger, 2014).

Furthermore, communication rights are part of broader set of social and cultural rights that have remained underdeveloped for political reasons. Some feared that recognition of communication rights of groups would lead to greater acknowledgement of the perspective of minority groups. In the context of Europe, the institutional recognition of diversity goes against the grain of the dominant focus on integration and increasingly the assimilation of newcomers. Rather than merely protecting vulnerable groups this would mean that communities originally hailing from outside Europe could potentially become empowered in gaining voice, agency and subjectivity by gaining a seat at the table of public deliberation. More broadly among the private sector in the West, there was additional general suspicion of ‘new world information and communication orders’, while actors in the Global South criticised it would only reify existing hierarchical flows of information, technology and values (Hamelink, 2004: 144–145). During fieldwork I recognised on the ground the ambiguous relation government officers and camp staff have

towards Internet and social media use among refugees: some refugee camps now provide free Wi-Fi, while particularly detention centres that house people whose asylum claims have been rejected severely limit and surveil inhabitants' Internet use.

Although not institutionalised, communication rights remain an important critical framework. In the next paragraph, the continued relevance and urgency of communication rights for forced migrants is elaborated. Drawing on the digital practices of forced migrants, who present themselves against the grain of human rights, societal perceptions and technology's intended usage, I turn to postcolonial critique and aim to provide 'alternative enunciations of human rights' (Sen, 2004: 324) by working towards a new interpretation of communication rights from the margins.

Rethinking communication rights from the margins

First I want to make clear what I mean with the margins: young refugees operate from the margins of European society and its human rights agenda, against dominant views of adults as well as against dominant conceptions of technology's intended users. First, forced migrants operate from Europe's societal margins, as non-voluntary migrants are typically 'othered', mistrusted and feared. In Europe, for the last 30 years, and particularly during the recent so-called 'refugee crisis' (2015–2016), governments and mainstream media have been mostly concerned with 'freedom from refugees' (Van Dijk, 1988: 184–185) rather than the freedoms of refugees as is evident from mainstream media portrayal in Europe (Zhang and Hellmueller, 2017). Second, the human rights of migrants are defined by how they are 'categorised' in governmental sorting processes and particularly forced migrants 'have been low – often invisible – on the international human rights agenda' (Grant, 2005). In the collision of the language of rights and the language of securitisation, the latter is gaining the upperhand, signalling a shift from cosmopolitan hospitality towards increased securitisation (Chouliaraki and Georgiou, 2017). Europe has shown it is increasingly concerned with the 'protection from refugees' rather than with the rights and 'protection of refugees' (Thomas, 2011: 71). Third, globally young people are dominantly perceived as hedonistic consumers of ICT's, their cultural production is often dismissed as a-political (e.g., vain selfie-takers and time-wasting vloggers) and their user practices as uncritical and unsafe (e.g., sexting, piracy) (Vickery, 2017). Finally, forced migrants also operate from technological margins, as is also evidenced by commonly used frames. Across Europe, there is an upsurge of 'digital islamophobia' (Horsti, 2017). Politicians, news media and extremist social-media users dismissed Syrian forced migrants carrying smartphones or taking selfies upon arrival on Greece shores as bogus asylum seekers. Dominant European expectations of asylum seekers as bedraggled and somehow unable to own nor handle advanced technologies, demonstrate dichotomous understandings of bodies that are naturalised into technology usage and non-European, non-white, non-middle class bodies that remain

alienated from it (Leurs, 2016). Although there is growing attention from the private sector that aims to tap into the new lucrative market of the ‘migration industry of connectivity (MIC)’ (Gordano Peile, 2014) – with companies such as Lebara offering mobile telephony and money transfer services directly targeting migrants in Europe – overall migrants, and particularly forced migrants, are not the intended users of ICT’s.

Addressing communication rights from the margins requires a reconsideration of the conceptual toolkit itself. The jargon around rights and communication has historically revolved around two principle perspectives, whereas the ‘right to communicate’ (R2C) signals a top-down, directed approach shaped by institutionalised state and government directives including UNESCO, the term ‘communication rights’ was championed by social movements, activists and civil society, being plural it is seen as more receptive and open for re-negotiation from below (Hamelink, 2008; Thomas, 2011). The following statement is illustrative for the R2C agenda: ‘the right to communicate unequivocally implies that marginalised people – women, refugees, displaced persons, migrant workers, people with disabilities, the poor, the disposed, must be empowered to express themselves in their own words’ (Lee, 2004: 7). The statement projects marginalised people to be necessarily dependent on outsider interventions in order to communicate their own concerns. The perceived reliance on outsiders for minority communities to ‘close the gap’, address deficiencies, speak their voice and ‘come up-to-speed’ with the Global North has been rightly critiqued in the field of postcolonial studies. Paradoxical processes and experiences of voice, agency and visibility of subordinate groups have been subject to longstanding critical debate, I take these insights to ground and operationalise communication rights. In an attempt to move away from the ‘parochialism of much Western legal theory and human rights discourse’ (Twining, 2009: 3), I conclude this section by offering a partial overview of human rights discourse produced from the Global South to work towards a communication rights from the margins.

In particular, I draw from human right activists and theorists who share social justice perspectives, such as opposing unjust power relations of imperialism, colonialism, racism and patriarchy. These insights can serve to compliment, nuance and critique the hegemonic Western human rights canon. Most notably, by questioning dominant modes of binary thinking the ethnocentric universality of much human rights discourse can be problematised. For example, Yash Ghai champions stronger acknowledgement of the Janus-faced character of most Bills of Rights rhetoric and practice, both universalism and relativism and individual liberalism and collective identities are to be balanced: ‘It is clear that simple polarities, universalism v particularism, secular v religious, tradition v modernity, do not easily work, a large measure of ambiguity is necessary for the accommodations that must be made’ (2009: 144).

Notwithstanding the paucity of literature – particularly in comparison to Anglo-European knowledge production – a great variety of perspectives has been articulated. For the purpose of this argument, I am taking Dembour’s

overview of human rights ‘schools of thought’ (2010)² to give examples of various non-western human rights schools of thought. First, publications in the ‘natural school of thought’ include, for example, the work on the future of Shari’a law by Abdullahi An-Na’im, a Northern-Sudanese Arab Muslim scholar. In this school of thought, rights are universal, given and are for every human being, but An-Na’im recognised they are translated and differentially applied in local contexts (2008). Second, ‘deliberative scholars’ approach human rights as the outcome of deliberation. Exemplary is Francis Deng’s ‘Talking it out: Stories in negotiating human relations’. In this book, he interprets the abstract values of universal human rights from the situated perspective of Ngok Dinka of the Sudan. In untangling ‘the Dinka way’, he highlights the constant interaction between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernisation’ (2006). Third, ‘protest scholars’ like Upendra Baxi are concerned with fighting for human rights for vulnerable groups and those suffering, this is a perpetual and eventually universal struggle as is evidenced from her discussion of the global women’s movement, the impact of globalisation and post-modernist critiques of universal human rights (Baxi, 2006). Fourth, illustrative for the ‘discourse school’ is the work of Makau Mutua. In his recent ‘Human Rights Standards. Hegemony, Law and Politics’ (2016) he writes from the ‘hitherto under-utilised perspective of the Global South’ to reconstruct how norms were established in the human right canon. By highlighting which actors are insiders and which remain outsiders to the human rights discussion, he argues for participatory and inclusive ‘norm-creating processes’. This is urgent because the current normative human rights ‘regime’ is grounded in non-negotiable ‘abstract individual autonomy’, thereby repeating cultural biases and affirming international order power asymmetries (2016: 8–11).

The present article adds in particular to the discourse school, and is inspired by post-colonial scholarship that seeks to distinguish between various dimensions of human rights as shaped and experienced among various hierarchically situated communities. This body of work can be characterised by a shared commitment to moving beyond binaries, by drawing connections and attention for relationalities and grounding local/global historical, geographical, geopolitical and contemporary power relations. Post-colonial scholarship tries to write against, redo, reconsider and situate human rights (Dhawan, 2014; Mutua, 2016). As Raka Shome and Rada Hegde argue, the postcolonial discourse approach enables us to ‘denaturalise communication’ flows in situated contexts by championing recognition for people’s ‘multiplicity of trajectories’ (2002: 265). It is my aim to translate these incentives to develop an understanding of communication rights as digitally performed from the margins.

Pradip Thomas, one of the few scholars writing on communication rights of displaced populations and refugees, recognises potential for social justice and cosmopolitanisation in the multiplicity of people’s and communities’ trajectories: ‘communication rights affirms communication as communion, community, conviviality, the very basis of human dignity’ (2011: 82). However, participatory communication divides are reflective of other persistent divides, and communication

rights are inseparable from other rights: ‘the right to live human lives, the right to enjoy life, to live life’ (2011: 71). Thomas suggests the following communication rights are of particular relevance for internally displaced people and refugees:

- The right of displaced people to use their own vernacular, or alternatively a language of their choice to conduct their internal and external affairs
- The right of displaced people to freedom of expression. This is a fundamental, foundational right
- The right of displaced people to basic education and literacy in a language of their choice
- The right of displaced people to practice a culture of their choice, and to have the freedom of religion
- The right of displaced people to hold, impart and receive opinions through all media
- The right of refugee groups to counter the willful misrepresentation of displaced people in the national media through appropriate representations at press and media councils or other regulatory bodies
- The right of displaced people to have access to and control over their own media (Thomas, 2011: 82).

Building on these concerns outlined by Thomas, I operationalise communication rights from the margins by focusing on digital practices as performative practices. Drawing on performative speech act theorists including J.L. Austin, Judith Butler and others, critical human right theorists have proposed the analytic lens of the ‘performance of human rights’ (Slyomovics, 2005: 10). Karen Zivi specifies that communication rights claims are distinct performances: they revolve around a set of ritualised communicative actions and practices we can engage in through which we (seek to) shape our world. We make such appeals for a variety of reasons, ‘we make rights claims to criticise practices we find objectionable, to shed light on injustice, to limit the power of government, and to demand accountability and intervention’ (Zivi, 2012: 4). Isin and Ruppert account for the specificity of performing rights claims on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, where right claims have ‘to be brought into being repeatedly through acts (repertoires, declarations, proclamations) and conventions (rituals, customs, practices, traditions, laws, institutions, technologies and protocols’ (2015: 25).

Key for my operationalisation of communication rights from the perspective of digital performativity is the attention for the active process of making rights claims. Social justice oriented researchers like the feminist theorist Judith Butler emphasise that performativity is only moral and ethical when it accounts for the social conditions from which it emerges (2005). Thus, the micro-political agency of digital practices of young refugees may be located through the prism of performing human right claims. These practices are however only meaningful when fundamentally situated within hierarchical and intersectional power relations of gender, race, nationality among others, and as inherently related to material conditions and

other basic human rights including access to shelter, food, well-being and education.

Methodological considerations

This article contributes to the emerging scholarly research focus of digital migration studies that seeks to understand the inter-relationships between the proliferation of ICT's and increasing global migration flows by studying migration 'in, through and by means of the internet' (Leurs and Prabhakar, forthcoming 2017). I draw from initial fieldwork findings from the ongoing participatory action research project 'Young connected migrants. Comparing digital practices of young refugees and expatriates in the Netherlands' (2016–2019). Focusing on the experiences of young refugees in particular, the analysis presented in this article revolves around the narratives and shared content of 16 key informants. This includes 7 young women and 9 young men between the ages of 15 and 34 years (on average 19 years old). Thirteen informants fled from various cities in Syria including Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Douma and Al-Sweida. This group included young people who arrived in the Netherlands as unaccompanied minors, who travelled with families and those who joined through family re-unification schemes. In addition, 3 young people participated who hailed from Yemen, Kurdistan/Iraq and Guinea. Participants had lived in the Netherlands anywhere between 6 months and 2 years, and the majority of participants had obtained formal refugee status. Self-selecting, snowballing recruitment resulted in this wonderful group of interested young people. I am aware this group of participants is not representative of all young refugees in the Netherlands, let alone Europe and I am aware digital diasporas are extremely heterogeneous too. I do not intend to make universalizing claims, it is my aim to take serious personal accounts and distinctly situated personal experiences to understand better how young informants position themselves vis-a-vis dominant discourses of forced migration. I offer here an intermittent snapshot from my ongoing fieldwork.

This group of informants participated in in-depth interviews, which took place upon the informant's own choice inside people's homes, in schools, and cafés and lasted between 30 minutes to 2 hours. These interviews were transcribed ad verbatim. Pseudonyms were chosen by informants themselves, and participants consented to the interviews. In addition, parents or guardians consented for those under 18. Based on the preference of the informants, interviews were held 1-on-1 or in duo's, and were conducted mostly in English and Dutch. To avoid reminding participants of their potentially traumatic asylum interviews, no formal translators were used. When informants could not express themselves in Dutch or English, translation into or from Arabic was made possible through informal peer translation of friends or classmates, or through online services like Google translate. Interviews were followed up by a digital ethnography, which involved participant observation and follow-up conversations through platforms including What'sApp and Facebook messenger. Furthermore, my analysis is indirectly informed by

teaching a 3-month critical media literacy class to a group of 20 young refugees as part of their 2-year preparation to enroll in regular secondary education; and through my role in the last year as a sport, music and dance facilitator at a shelter for unaccompanied minor refugees.

It was my intention to develop a ‘non-digital-media-centric’ (Pink et al., 2016) fieldwork approach, to achieve a relational and situated understanding of everyday online and offline experiences and practices. Aiming to accommodate adaptability, the interviews were organised to allow informants to direct the course of the conversations. In the beginning of the interviews, participants were invited to draw a paper and pencil Internet map, consisting of a spider diagram to map out the various platforms, applications and websites they considered important and frequently used. The conversation was then structured according to the applications included in the Internet maps. All participants owned or had shared access to smartphones (handheld devices that allow users to initiate/receive voice calls and send/receive messages but also to take photos, videos, use social media apps) (Gillespie et al., 2016). Second, the informants were invited to co-research their own smartphones as personal pocket archives. This approach was developed in collaboration with the Amsterdam Museum Imagine Identity and Culture (Boussaid and Boom, 2016), where we initiated the focus on the smartphone as a personal pocket archive by organising a meet and eat evening. During this evening we organised a dinner at the museum with young refugees and as a participatory focus group they were invited to show and discuss their social media presence which was projected on a large wall in the museum. This also allowed for young people to share their common experiences rather than having to discuss experiences with a white, highly educated, European male researcher like myself. In practice, participants were invited to select and annotate important photos, videos or audio files; from before they fled, during their travels and from their period of living in the Netherlands. The selection process was made productive to elicit narratives of identity, affectivity, rights and literacies. This way, informants have a greater say over their representation in comparison with traditional academic output.

Research participants also became collaborators, for example, in the form of film directors and research interns in making short individual video portraits. In these video portraits, young connected migrants reflect upon and curate their own pocket archives photos, videos, music play list and app preferences. My approach differs from previous digital storytelling initiatives setup to empower young refugees (De Leeuw and Rydin, 2007; López-Bech and Zúñiga, 2017; Sawhney, 2009), in the sense that my ongoing study is oriented towards acknowledging the already existing personal archive of these young people. Previous projects typically mobilise external approaches based on Photovoice and other participatory media production philosophies to instruct vulnerable groups in order to generate specific narratives of agency, awareness and resilience. I took another ethical stance by taking digital self-representations that were not created for research purposes serious as an important site of alternative knowledge production. This decision

originates from my wider moral commitment which is inspired by feminist ethics-of-care ideals.

In my work I am reflexive about power hierarchies between researchers and informants, and I am striving towards non-exploitative research relations and take serious accountability and responsibility for research consequences. Informants play vital roles as members of the project team. Abdullah, a 22-year-old self-proclaimed ‘computer geek’ from Yemen conducted an internship with this project to support activities at the museum, while Karim collaborates in making short video portraits with participants. These professional experiences might improve their chances at securing new educational or employment opportunities. This is particularly urgent for vulnerable groups including young refugees who live precarious lives (Leurs and Prabhakar, forthcoming 2017). The empirical section below demonstrates there is urgency to take serious existing archives of user-generated-content in digital storytelling activism and scholarship.

Claiming communication rights

In this final empirical section, a selection of young refugees’ digital practices is analysed as a performance of communication rights. Shifting from conceptual reflection of law-in-books to law-in-action, I offer empirically grounded bottom-up experiences and perceptions of human rights as narrated by young refugees on social media and smartphones. These insights are used to speak back to existing legal underpinnings related to communication rights and vice versa communication rights are taken as a scaffolding to map perceived communication (and other rights) deficits.

Right to self-determination

Young refugees often live precarious lives and long for a sense of normality. Frustrations of not being able to control one’s life course, having to make do with harsh external circumstances, lengthy procedures and seemingly arbitrary decisions are another common thread in the personal pocket archives of the informants. Living at the whim of others can mean that one day everything changes, from unexpectedly having to move from one camp to another to getting good news. For example, early January 2017 Abdullah celebrated the positive decision about his asylum case by posting a statement in Arabic *‘الجميع امور تيسير و عقبال للاقامة استلامي خير جاني اليوم... طويلاً دام صبر بعد الحمد لله’* (Thank God after long patience. Today, I came to get to live and wish to make things easier for everyone) and English: ‘Thanks God today I got a positive decision by the IND’. He felt that finally he got his autonomy needed to be able to build a new life in the Netherlands. In article 1 of the International covenant on economic, social and cultural rights (1966), it is stated that ‘all peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development’. Karim powerfully narrates his experiences of living through war, violence and

destruction prior to fleeing. His statement can be read as a powerful claim to the right of self-determination:

I got so frustrated. I ended up sitting in a dark room. Alone. Staring at the walls. Doing literally nothing. Trying to get out of my loneliness by opening my Facebook on my phone. To you know see the news and these things. But it wasn't doing me any better. I was making it even worse. You may ask my why or how. Well. Every time I opened Facebook I saw people outside Syria. Not only Syrians, no, other people around my age. Celebrating their youth. Studying. Travelling. Having fun. Doing what normal people do around that age. Of course this world has seen many wars. But in our digital age we don't only experience the war in our country. But we also experience, from a distance, the peace in other countries.

This is a quote taken from a 'TedX Youth' talk he gave late January 2017. The talk was filmed with a smartphone and broadcasted through Facebook Live, and the stream is stored on his personal profile page. So during power cuts, Karim would find himself alone, in a room lacking light. Through his smartphone he maintained a transnational 'connected presence' (Diminescu, 2008: 572) with loved ones and friends. It was through seeing photos and videos of his friends that he was continuously confronted with how everyday life had so fundamentally changed for the worse. Karim's engaging with these other possible lives could be read as a longing for cosmopolitanisation. However, through consuming this content and internalising this unattainable difference he was reminded of his own state of ontological insecurity. Miyase Christensen and André Janson have theorised how the mediatization of our everyday lives, in particular social changes in means of digital expressivity and transnational connectivity may foster 'cosmopolitan trajectories'. They however also add that cosmopolitanisation remains a site of 'symbolic power' (2015: 30–31). Karim's experience signals the vital urgency of situating everyday lived cosmopolitanism in uneven grids of symbolic power. Digital identities offer imaginaries of other possible lives, but they may also serve as harsh reminders of one's precarity and as if life is put on-hold. As a matter of fact, sad reminders of other possible lives he could be living strengthened Karim's conviction. In fleeing to Europe, he made the difficult decision to risk his life in an effort to regain control over his own life.

Right of freedom of expression

Zeinah's question 'why can't I say what I want' posted on her personal Facebook profile page was included as an epigraph above. During our meet-and-eat focus group discussion, it became clear that censorship and freedom of expression was a fundamental concern of the majority of the participants. For example, several participants shared experiences of photos and videos documenting atrocities in Syria that were removed from Facebook, Instagram and other platforms. Platform owners offered standard take-down notices mentioning posted content violated their terms of service. In response, various strategies are used to increase

the chances content could circulate, including setting up multiple personal profile pages, maintaining social media accounts for local war journalists from afar, sharing information about using virtual private network (VPN) services to anonymise postings or using encrypted personal messaging services like What'sApp and WickR to circulate content beyond social media platforms.

As Zeinah reflects: 'I use Facebook different from Dutch society. I had two accounts. One political one. And another one.' Although she currently lives in the Netherlands like fellow participants, she emphasises transnational engagement with the developments in Syria shape her everyday life: 'Everything is politics. We are so involved in the war in Syria – everything is – there is no distinction between politics and our everyday life'. Managing multiple accounts is common for many teenagers who negotiate digital identity performances aimed at distinct audiences. Others entirely shy away from political engagement in fear of repercussions. For example, Obbay, a 22-year-old young man from Homs who managed to continue studying piano in a conservatory upon arriving in the Netherlands, focuses on social media 'to promote what I'm doing, who I am', rather than politics:

Actually it is very dangerous to talk about the political things in the social media, because you know we have many sides fighting now. It's like one coin with two faces. If you use it for this face, the other face will be mad of you. Because of that I don't use social media for political things, I only use it for what I'm doing, what is my dream for example.

In sharp contrast, Farhan uses social media to publicise his engagement with the international community of fellow Kurdish people seeking to establish greater autonomy for Iraqi Kurdistan. Farhan is a 16-year-old young man. He was born in the Netherlands to parents who fled, but he grew up in Kurdistan, before returning to the Netherlands nearly 2 years ago. Although he knows it may have repercussions, he feels it is important to engage with this cause online, there he argues 'we can say we are Kurds, we are trying to become a proper country, to make our own decisions'. He posts photos on Facebook and Instagram about the cause, and takes selfies with the Kurdish flag: 'Look I have 30 friends in the Netherlands, and maybe 5 in Germany, and 5 in Switzerland, so they see these photos. So they know Iraqi Kurdistan exists'. For young refugee men and women, posting on social media has become a politicised performative practice. Strategies like managing multiple accounts, taking explicit stance or self-censorship appeal to the rights of freedom of expression, as laid down in article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers' (UDHR, 1948). The explicit recognition of the right to use 'any media' speaks to the various platforms young refugees use to document and communicate human right violations. The explicit emphasis these rights apply 'regardless of frontiers' holds particular relevance for young refugees living in the diaspora.



Figure 1. Interview setup (photograph by the author, September 2016).

Right to information

The right to information as laid down also in Article 19 of the UDHR as the right to ‘seek, receive and impart information’ also holds particular urgency in the lives of young refugees (Figure 1).

Jo is a 34-year-old self-proclaimed ‘hactivist’, ‘information must be free’ is his motto. When I asked Jo permission to audio record our interview, he brought out his audio recorder to record the conversation for his own records. That was a first time experience for me, which is revealing of both feelings of distrust towards outsiders and a desire to ensure outsiders can be held accountable. We see some of the material objects dear to him, his portable video camera, an audio recorder, a small spy-cam, a piece of hardware, one of his laptops and old postcards of Old Damascus, cigarettes, coffee cups brought from Syria and coffee bought in the Netherlands but originally from Turkey. As the revolution against president Assad turned into violence and after being jailed for several months, he fled. Using a Sailing marine weather app to ensure himself whether conditions would be manageable he attempted to travel to Greece from Turkey. During his crossing he lost one of his phones, and one of his laptops. Jo might be an atypical example, but there are several points which are illustrative for patterns discernable among the Syrian refugee community in Europe. Important is the page Jo insisted on opening before taking the photograph. It’s the Wikimedia entry on Cunningham’s Law: ‘The best way to get the right answer on the Internet is not

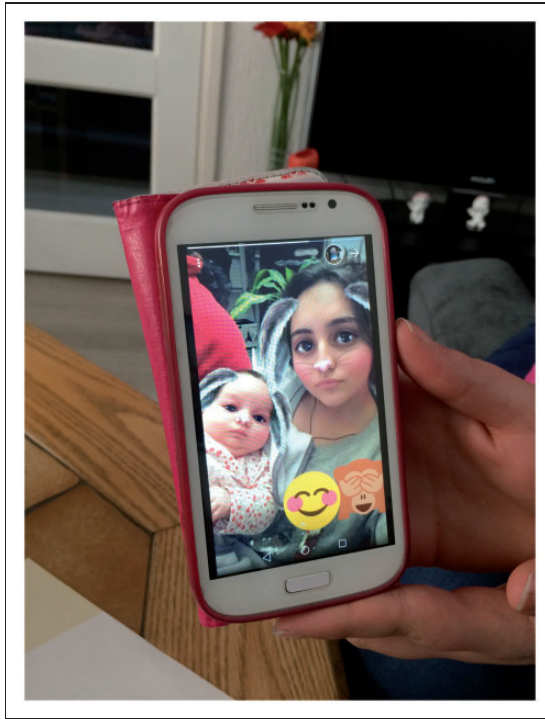


Figure 2. Patrisia and her 1.5-year-old baby sister, photo manipulated with filters, March 2017.

to ask a question, it's to post the wrong answer' (Wikimedia, 2017). Jo explains that because 'Syrians don't trust anyone anymore – especially TV' he goes by the 'old trick from Wikipedia godfather, to collect info just throw a lie online and start collect the right answers'. This strategy allows him to weigh various opinions and sides. This tactic is illustrative for negotiating 'information precarity' (Wall et al., 2017), the major media and communication obstacle refugees are struggling with is trying to establish what information can be trusted and to weigh the rumours that are spreading through digital feedback networks (Dekker et al., forthcoming 2017). This pertains to a difficulty in finding smugglers, navigation, as well as locating information pertaining to official national asylum procedures, local government contacts, education opportunities, but also local Dutch everyday customs, habits, expectations and routines.

Right to family life

All informants used social media to maintain forms of family life across geographical distances.

Figure 2 shows a photo of Patrisia, a 15-year-old girl from Aleppo who is into badminton and piano, which she shared from her personal archive. She chose this

manipulated photo depicting herself and her 1.5 months old baby sister. It was one of the pictures dearest to her heart. For her it signifies both the period of living separated from her mother for 18 months, her mother fled by herself to the Netherlands and Patrisia joined her through family reunification. In the Netherlands, a new baby sister was welcomed in the family, and Patrisia used Snapchat to share her love for her sister with her grandparents and best friends still living in Syria. Such transnational Snapchat conversations are illustrative of digitally claiming the right to family life, which are laid down, for example, in Article 8.1 of the UN Convention of the Child: 'Parties undertake to respect the right of the child to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations as recognised by law without unlawful interference' (1989). The appeal to transnational family reflects also her cosmopolitan 'mode of attachment', as part of more 'multiple, uneven and non-exclusive affiliations' (Clifford, 1998: 180) like her new classmates in the Netherlands and local Dutch neighbours. Transnational attachments are increasingly politicised particularly because of their challenging of 'conventional notions of locality as well as of belonging' (Clifford, 1998: 180). On the European level of policy and discourse, such transnational family practices have been called upon to delineate boundaries between what entails proper Europeanness (Kringelbach, 2015), particularly because they question dominant understandings of the European 'normal single nation family' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2014: 2). The fear of the satellite dish in the 1990s and policing of Internet café's in the early 2000s in the Netherlands has been supplanted by a pan European fear of transnational Skype video-chat to cause isolation, fragmentation and possibly radicalisation (Parks, 2012).

Right to cultural identity

Struggles over cultural identity and recognition are a final theme emerging from young refugees' reflections on their personal pocket archives. There are multiple ways informants emphasise their diasporic attachments and love for their home country, city, town or region of origin, for example, through nicknames such as 'free Kurdistan', creating publics on Twitter and Instagram around hashtags such as #I_love_Syria and sharing memories (for example, those algorithmically generated and suggested by Facebook after 12 months of posting photos or videos with tagged Facebook friends). Through such practices, young refugees can be said to actively claim their right to cultural identification. These practices resonate, for example, with UDHR article 27.1: 'Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community' and article 5 of the UNESCO Universal declaration on cultural diversity 'all persons have the right to participate in the cultural life of their choice and conduct their own cultural practices' (2001).

Most strikingly, Moonif, a 23-year-old young man from Lattakia, Syria whose main hobby is scouting, highlighted asylum procedures that pose an increasing risk to one's historical digital identity archives: 'The IND Dutch [Immigration and naturalization service, KL] ask your name on Facebook during the interview. Like they look

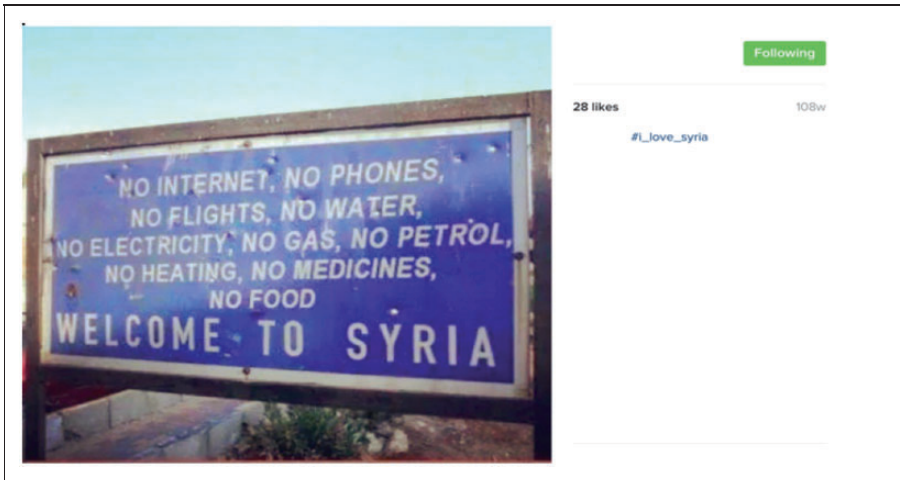


Figure 3. 'Welcome to Syria', manipulated photo posted on Instagram profile of Moonif, October 2015.

at photos you post, like a packet of cigarettes they know where it is from. People delete or change their profiles'. In their fear of digital traces being used by migration officials to reject asylum claims, young refugees are self-censoring their historical social media presence. This self-censorship is a harsh violation of human rights.

Additionally, informants commonly express great dissatisfaction with the way in which refugees are portrayed in mainstream European media outlets.

This was also touched upon by Moonif. He spoke about the image he shared on Instagram, to critique dominant a-historical framings of Syria as a place with 'no internet, no phones, no flights, no water' and so on that tend to silence the fact that before the war people were living 21st century lives in Syria (Figure 3). Wael, 22-year-old young man from Douma, Syria, labels himself as a 'human rights activist' and he further elaborates on this theme. He states his 'passion is to integrate the Syrian society in the Dutch society' and he is eager to counter dominant shallow and homogenising news frames using social media:

To show who we are and why we are here. We are not just like any people. We are educated, we had a civilization. I want to show this to the Dutch people. I don't know why Dutch people don't ask themselves that why Syrian people weren't here in Holland before the war? We didn't need Europe. We didn't want to leave our country.

Wael adds he is eager to conduct his own cultural practices and share news about the ongoing violence and suffering in Syria especially to inform fellow Dutch. However, he does not feel his messages are heard: 'when I share anything about the war like some horrible pictures from Syria, the Dutch people they don't like, or

they don't see it. But when I put something else from the normal life they like it, see it and share it'. He feels his participation is tolerated and only really acknowledged when he presents himself in a certain expected way. Rather than sensing solidarity, fellow Dutch contacts seem to engage only with a narrow, 'cosmetic cosmopolitanism' (Nakamura, 2002: 14) that is de-politicised and works to conceal structural injustices.

Conclusions

Young refugees are more often than not connected migrants (Diminescu, 2008). Although young refugees are extremely vulnerable as they are often primarily concerned with gaining access to basic rights such as food, shelter, physical and mental security, education and work, the smartphone use of young refugees shows that communication rights are increasingly fundamental. Communication rights do not only offer the means to articulate other human rights, they are interwoven with those other basic rights (Hamelink, 2004; Witteborn, 2011). This article draws on the experiences of 16 young refugees in the distinctly situated context of the Netherlands. Combining law-in-books and law-in-action, this intervention seeks to offer an affirmative critique of communication rights from the margins through theoretical, methodological and empirical scrutiny. Conceptually, my focus was not on the top-down infrastructure of human rights frameworks, but rather on bottom-up communication rights claims from the margins. This way communication rights can be deployed as a scaffolding to map perceived communication (and other rights) deficits, but also as a lens to show the micro-political potential for agency in everyday digital storytelling practices. Methodologically, in devising a participatory action research setup, the smartphone is considered as a personal pocket archive. Rather than externally imposing as an outsider a digital storytelling approach to empower a marginalised group, this study seeks to take serious young refugees' own digital archives as important sites of alternative knowledge production. Focusing on the digital performativity of right claims, the empirical section details how young refugees constitute themselves as political subjects of communication rights online. The main claims for communication rights that emerged from the analysis revolve around the right to self-determination, the right to self-expression, the right to information, the right to family life and the right to cultural identity. Various social changes young refugees reflect upon result from mediatisation. First, this is discernable in the paradoxical implications of 'cosmopolitanising trajectories' (Christensen and Jansson, 2015) that may both exacerbate feelings of loneliness or frustrations about non-recognition. Second, young refugees strategically navigate between various platforms, mobilising the medium-specific affordances for distinct aims and to reach particular audiences (Madianou, 2014). In making such claims to communicate, forced migrants go against the grain of human rights as they are hierarchically positioned as subalterns along the lines of nationality, geography, religion, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, generation and technology.

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Notes

1. For the purposes of this article, I use the contested term ‘refugee’; but it should be highlighted that participants have highly ambivalent feelings about that label, having moved claiming asylum in the Netherlands because of existential threats to themselves individually or members of their family. The term is commonly interpreted within the false dichotomy of forced and economic migration, which is problematic as boundaries between volition and coercion are often blurred, rather than straightforward. Additionally, I use the label ‘youth’ as a relational category instead of a clearly defined age limit.
2. Marie-Bénédicte Dembour distinguishes among (1) ‘natural scholars’ like Jack Donnelly or Michael Perry who consider human rights as ‘given’ based on nature, universal reason, or God; (2) ‘deliberative scholars’ like Jürgen Habermas and Michael Ignatieff who consider human rights as ‘agreed’ based on consensus on how a polity should be run; (3) ‘protest scholars’ who consider human rights as ‘fought for’ based on traditions of social struggles, Dembour mentions the philosopher Jacques Derrida’s work *On cosmopolitanism and forgiveness* as exemplary for this school; (4) ‘discourse scholars’ like Wendy Brown who conceive of human rights as ‘talked about’, rights in this sense are constructed through contested language processes (2010).

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