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Social Media, Mobile Phones and Migration in Africa: A Review of the Evidence

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Abstract: The role of new technologies, including mobile phones and social media, in migration moved to the fore during the European migrant crisis in 2015. Images of Syrians fleeing civil war, along with Iraqis and Afghans, guided by their mobile phones became common in the international media. While much has been made about the importance of mobile phones for migrants, including by humanitarian organizations, what evidence do we have about the role such technologies have in migration, particularly for migrants in, and from, Africa? This article uses a semi-systematic approach to evaluate the strength of the evidence around the use (or not) of mobile phones and social media in the migratory pathways of Africans, primarily to Europe. This includes detailed systematic database searches, submissions from experts such as academics and practitioners as well as the use of snowball citation searches. We argue that given the intensity of the claims affirming the role of new technologies in migration, the evidence remains surprisingly anecdotal and weak. In short, the use of mobile phones, and social media, on migratory pathways cannot be generalized and further investigation is urgently required to better determine whether, and how, such technologies are shaping and transforming migration in the ways so frequently argued.

Key words: Social media, mobile phones, Africa, migration, information and communication technologies (ICTs)

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The image of refugees landing on Europe's shores and holding up their cell phone, searching for a signal, has become a ubiquitous symbol of migration over the last several years. Humanitarian organizations have jumped on the apparent importance of technology for refugees and migrants proclaiming that 'mobile phone and internet access is as critical to refugees' safety and security as food, shelter and water' (UNHCR, 2016). Anecdotal evidence abounds about how important mobile phones, and social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, have been for those making a treacherous journey across borders, or even being internally displaced. Much of the research around the apparent centrality of internet connectivity for people on the move has focussed on those fleeing the Syrian Civil War (2015–present) or the experience of Iraqis and Afghanis struggling to make it to Europe (Dekker et al., 2018; Gillespie et al., 2018; Leurs and Smets, 2018; Mancini et al., 2019). To a large extent, as this article will argue, the experience of these groups has been generalized to be applicable, or at least relatable, to the experiences of African migrants. This article will critically assess the evidence around the use of such technologies by African migrants in recent years.

Africa is a continent with a population on the move. Migration from and within Africa has been increasing with more than a quarter of Africans indicating that they would like to move abroad, although those actually preparing to leave their home country is far smaller (Natale et al., 2018).[1] More than half of African migrants remain on the continent but the majority of those that do leave are destined for Europe, with Asia as the second-most popular destination (primarily consisting of East Africans, and Egyptians, travelling to work in the Gulf as domestics and temporary labourers) (Natale et al., 2018: 10). As such, our primary focus is on migration from Africa to Europe. In speaking of 'African migration pathways' one risks putting a diverse range of experiences in the same category, and homogenizing populations, as has been highlighted by broader studies that have emphasized just how different the migratory experience can be for individuals with multiple flows that converge and diverge significantly (Crawley et al., 2016: 20). And it is particularly difficult to generalize about the migration experiences of such a diverse continent—a Nigerian travelling through Niger to Libya will inevitably have a very different journey, with different middlemen, smugglers or even an airplane ticket, than someone from Eritrea, on the other side of the continent. Indeed, the experiences of migrants from one small village can also differ dramatically, not least of all because the situation in transiting countries can change so significantly week to week.

This evidence review has been conducted in the context of a larger research project on social media and conflict,[2] for which we have been engaging in extensive research among Somali migrants to Kenya, South Africa and Italy.[3] Our interviews have demonstrated just how varied the experiences are—from those travelling in relative luxury taking along belongings (as one interviewee said, 'some migrants look like they are going on holiday', even as they cross the Mediterranean in a boat), and having consistent internet access along the journey, to the most arduous experiences with everything taken from them at the outset, years-long imprisonment, multiple attempts and significant bodily harm.

The focus in this article is on the impact and role of technology on migrants' journeys, including the planning, movement and immediate arrival. There are other critical aspects about the extent to which technology may be transforming migration, including how migration is altering the adoption of technology in destination countries (including the arrival of highly skilled migrants, for example, many upper and middle class Syrians); the role of migrants in transferring technological skills back to their countries of origins (as clearly seen in the case of Somalia where many of the leading technology, telecoms and media

companies have been started and financed by members of the diaspora); and the rapidly growing use of technology to manage migration by governments and international organizations (this includes controversial practices such as the use of algorithms in the regulation of borders, settlement and asylum cases). These uses, while important, are beyond the scope of this review. We specifically explore the strength of the evidence around claims that mobile phones are transforming the journeys of African migrants, and in what ways.

There are several currents that underlie the present focus on the use of mobile phones, and social media, by migrants on their journeys. On the one hand, there are those, including some nationalist politicians, anti-immigration groups and right-wing media, that are arguing that new technologies are facilitating migration and are making it easier for people to travel, as the UK's Daily Mail claimed in 2015 with the headline 'Smartphones are the secret weapon fuelling the great migration invasion' (Lawson, 2015). Reflecting this general line of argument, the article explained how the smartphone is the 'untold accelerator of mass migration' by making historically arduous journeys easier and by reducing the 'trauma' of being disconnected to family and friends back home. Whereas earlier migrants were reportedly faced with a choice—to leave and often cut ties with their country of origin, cell phones, are seen as removing the 'penalty' of 'cutting [oneself] absolutely off from [ones] family' because today's 'emigrating young man does not suffer—at least to anything like the same extent—the terrible sense of being sheared from the family he loves'. This narrative instils fear or concern in readers that new technologies are making it so easy for migrants to travel that there will be a continued flood of refugees that cannot be stemmed.

On the other hand, there is a line of argument by humanitarian organizations and tech companies, also elevating, or emphasizing the role of technology in migration. Or, as the New York Times explained, for 'modern' migrants, 'smartphone maps, global positioning apps, social media and WhatsApp have become essential tools […] to post real-time updates about routes, arrests, border guard movements and transport, as well as places to stay and prices […]' (Brunwasser, 2015). This reflects a more techno-utopian approach, reflecting strands of arguments common in discourses around technology as a 'liberating' force so common a decade ago (Diamond, 2010; Diamond and Plattner, 2012), and one primarily for good, that empowers individuals, particularly against more autocratic forces, whether states or criminal networks (Manacorda and Tesei, 2020; Schmidt and Cohen, 2013). Technology companies such as Google and Facebook have embraced and actively advocated for this approach, positioning their companies as advocates for freedom of expression and tools to 'give people a voice' (Facebook, 2020) because doing so 'empowers the powerless and pushes society to be better over time' (Price, 2019). Empowering voice is seen as directly correlated with improving government accountability (reducing corruption, for example) or even preventing war, as Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's CEO, has claimed repeatedly.[4] The United Nations Refugee Agency has developed a programme focussed on Digital Access, Inclusion and Participation, which includes their work on Connectivity for Refugees. One aspect of this work is on 'bringing the digital revolution to displaced people, and to the humanitarians serving them' (UNHCR Innovation Service, 2017). They are working with telecommunications companies, as well as Microsoft, Google and Facebook to provide connectivity to refugee camps, as well as on more bespoke projects such as a joint UNHCR and Google project mapping major displacement crises and their humanitarian interventions (for an example, see Dobbs, 2008). But what evidence is being relied on by those that argue the centrality and importance of new technologies in supporting the movement of migrants? In short, how can we be sure that beyond

anecdotes, new technologies are really having a transformative impact on migration, and in what ways?

This article proceeds by briefly introducing the methodology for the semi-structured evidence review. It then reviews the major findings in three areas: the use of ICTs and social media in the pre-migration context; the use of these technologies on the journey; and any evidence on how ICTs and social media are being used on arrival. It concludes by identifying the most significant gaps for further research to strengthen the evidence base around the role of new technologies.

I. Defining Methodological Boundaries: Evaluating the Evidence

The starting point to evaluate the evidence was guidance on 'Assessing the Strength of Evidence' issued by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) (2014). In recent years DFID, along with other government aid agencies, has pushed for the increasing use of systematic reviews and evidence assessments as both evidence to better inform their policies and programmes as well as indications of the efficiency and impact of these. More broadly, evidence reviews allow decision-makers and practitioners to act in an informed way and may provide academics with a clearer overview of the field to better interrogate gaps and possible areas of controversy (O'Leary et al., 2016: 75).

We adopted a semi-systematic approach[5] that combines elements of a systematic review, such as database searches and quality assessments, along with other methods such as snowball citation searches and expert recommendations. As the DFID guidance places greater emphasis on the evaluation of quantitative evidence (which flows from their focus on development economics), we sought inspiration from reviews that sought to engage with a diverse range of texts, much of which is qualitative (as the majority of research on social media and migration is), when evaluating the quality of evidence (Cummings et al., 2015; Schoemaker and Stremlau, 2014). Given the relatively low numbers of texts identified in our search, we strove to include as many pieces of valid research as possible. This necessitated the inclusion of grey literature, which are often hosted and disseminated in ways that are very different to academic publications and therefore may not be picked up by the database searches.[6] This is another reason why reaching out to experts, and especially practitioners working in the field, was central to our approach. In recognition of the challenges of including research by African researchers in semi-structured literature searches, and efforts to 'decolonize' review methodologies (Chambers et al., 2018), we explicitly sought out ways of incorporating African-led research into our review. We did this by reviewing university databases (where available) from some priority countries included in our search (including Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, Nigeria, Senegal, Eritrea, Somalia) and by reaching out to researchers based at African universities.

In the first instance, relevant research was sourced through the systematic review process of undertaking a series of searches using variations of the terms 'technology', 'migration', 'ICT', 'Africa', 'social media', 'mobile phones' and 'refugee'. These searches were carried out across multiple scholarly databases including Google Scholar, Web of Science and Scopus. The bibliographic data for all searches were combined into a single spreadsheet. Our semi-structured evidence review focusses on research published in the last decade between mid-2010 and mid-2020. The choice of this period is due to the fact that it spans both the period before and after the European 'migration crisis', as well as seeing a considerable expansion in both the use of and scholarship on social media. This period also experienced a significant increase in the use of mobile telephones across Africa.[7]

In total, close to 26,000 texts were obtained through these database searches. From these, 4,074 duplicates were removed. The remaining 21,865 were then manually sorted based on

the relevance of their titles and abstracts and of these 21,445 were later removed, leaving 420 publications. Texts were removed based on their lack of relevance, usually because they did not deal with the issue of human migration (removed examples included research on animal or data migration) or they focussed on migrants from regions other than Africa. These remaining texts then had their full abstracts considered, and where the abstracts did not provide an adequate amount of information on the content of the work, a reading of other sections of the text was then undertaken.

The use of empirical evidence was a requirement for inclusion and was the most restrictive factor eliminating many articles. At the end, 34 texts were relevant to this review following this initial surface-level analysis.[8] Five additional pieces of grey literature were added, out of the nine pieces in total which were reviewed. Despite their relatively small number, grey literature proved important as this is a rapidly emerging field and peer-reviewed academic publications often have a significant lag time between research and the publication of findings. Furthermore, given the strong interest from the policy community, including refugee support agencies as well as national security and international governmental bodies, these organizations have often been commissioning or initiating research to support their interventions. Grey literature, in this field, also tends to be more inclusive; we noticed a distinct trend that such publications are more likely to be authored or co-authored by researchers from African countries. While the publications may be sponsored or published by organizations in the global north, they often had partners from Africa. This research did not, however, differ from the positions taken by the entity commissioning the research. This is in line with previous studies have found that in some cases research on ICTs and development does not differ significantly depending on the geographical region where it is produced, but rather there is often a shared normative approach reflecting both the international policy agenda and funding realities (Gagliardone et al., 2015; Stremlau, 2018).

There are limitations to this method. Most notably is the choice of search terms, which we aimed to keep quite general to capture as many texts as possible initially, but we cannot rule out the possibility that there is other literature that uses different terms. Furthermore, we only used these search terms in English,[9] limiting the inclusion of literature in other languages. To triangulate these findings and to determine if there was any key literature that the systematic search may have missed, we contacted close to 70 experts (including both academics and practitioners) in the field(s) of ICTs and migration and asked them for their recommendations. We made considerable effort in targeting researchers from African countries. Experts were invited to provide up to five recommendations that focussed on the evidence they have relied on to understand the impact of social media and ICTs on the pathways of African migrants. We received recommendations of just over 50 texts, but there was less overlap than we expected between the texts that were collected via the systematic database searches and the recommendations of the experts.

As with all evidence reviews, one of the most challenging aspects is establishing a rigorous quality assessment protocol that to evaluate the relevance and rigour of the texts in relation to the question at hand. One consideration was scope, and most of the texts suggested by the experts did not directly engage with migrants of African origin. As mentioned before, and as identified in other more general scoping reviews on related topics (such as Mancini *et al.*, 2019), much of this work relates to Syrian refugees, or mixed groups of migrants. A similar problem also arose in the consideration of the texts which were obtained via the database searches. While they made mention of migrants of African origin, very few offered empirical data that were directly relevant.

Only four texts overlapped between the 34 texts that were considered in full and the

51 recommendations by the experts, including: 'The smartphone as a lifeline: an exploration of refugees' use of mobile communication technologies during their flight' (Alencar et al., 2019), 'Social Media Usage, Tahriib (Migration) and Settlement among Somali Refugees in France' (Charmarkeh, 2013), 'A study of the communication channels used by migrants and asylum seekers in Italy, with a particular focus on online and social media' (Sanchez et al., 2018) and 'Becoming (Im)Perceptible: Forced Migrants and Virtual Practice' (Witteborn, 2015). Of these texts, the first did not include African migrants in its sample and was therefore eventually excluded during the quality assessment phase.

There were several texts that were frequently recommended by experts. The most commonly cited publications, each with at least five separate experts recommending them, included: 'Mapping refugee media journeys' (Gillespie et al., 2016), 'Smart Refugees: How Syrian Asylum Migrants Use Social Media Information in Migration Decision-Making' (Dekker et al., 2018) and 'Smart (phone) travelling: understanding the use and impact of mobile technology on irregular migration journeys' (Zijlstra and Liempt, 2017). None of these was picked up by the systematic review process, as they were removed early on since they did not directly investigate populations that were African in origin. As with much of the literature that was recommended, these studies reflected more on the general research around migration pathways, ICTs and social media and tended to draw on examples from the Middle East where there is clearly a far larger corpus of research on this topic.

Overall, the evidence that emerged through the database search is sparse and points to some major systemic gaps. Most the papers that passed through the quality assessment filter relied on a combination of research methods, largely qualitative. Twenty-three papers used interview-based data with semi-structured interviews being the most common, while 11 papers were based on ethnographic observation, five used quantitative data and three involved focus groups. Other approaches included a range of digital methods, social network analysis, social media analysis, content maps and narrative techniques. Overall, many papers lacked methodological clarity and a significant portion of the papers offered a weak explanation as to the scope of data collected and how it was analysed.

In terms of the populations that were considered, the majority looked at more than one national group. There were some exceptions to this, with five texts considering Eritrean migrants only, three considering Somali migrants and one considering those from Senegal. Overall, migrants from the following countries were considered by at least one paper: Algeria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Libya, Mali, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria and Uganda. Clear findings along national lines are not possible, because in many papers respondents were grouped together. Often these sample sizes were small (in some cases there was only one respondent from a particular country) or in some studies, the data concerning African migrants had been rolled into a larger data sample including migrants from other parts of the world, making these findings less useful for our purposes.

The debates and evidence that dominated the search can be grouped under three main themes: How social media encouraged (or discouraged) Africans to migrate to Europe (including its use in the pre-migration context); the role of social media during a migration journey; and evidence of ICT and social media use among recent arrivals in a destination (whether final or anticipated to be transient).

II. Exploring the Evidence

Many of the articles situated themselves in some of the broader debates that have historically characterized research on ICTs in Africa, including a focus on the 'digital divide' or the

ever-fluctuating gap between information haves and have-nots. Over time, different characterizations of this phenomenon have emerged. In the early 1990s, the emphasis was on access to technology, or the lack of computers that are connected to the internet. This later evolved to focus on the divergent ways users were actually making use of ICTs, for example, how gender, economic background or age might shape internet use and the ability or reduced ability for someone to perform a task online (whether selling goods or looking for resources about migratory pathways or how to claim asylum). And more recently, studies on the digital divide have been connecting internet use with offline outcomes; for example, the relationship between how people may use the internet to search for information about migration and whether this leads to safer or more efficient journeys (Gagliardone, 2019: 63–79). One characteristic of this work that is helpful to keep in mind in the context of literature around new technologies and migration is the tendency for these technologies to been seen as disruptors, viewed in isolation, rather than embedded in a context where it may propagate continuities, or enhance certain social phenomenon but not entirely displace them (e.g. cutting the costs of procuring ransom incurred for criminal networks that are involved in holding migrants' hostage, thus facilitating their business, but not necessarily empowering migrants to go around or cut-out these intermediaries).

The emphasis on 'new' technology has also advanced research approaches on migration that has been focussed on the 'digital divide' challenges migrants may have had to overcome prior to their journey, including limited mobile phone reception, the high costs of accessing data or the difficulty obtaining suitable devices. Differences in technological capabilities between migrants can exist across age groups, educational backgrounds and from both urban and rural regions, which can all affect the digital competencies of migrants prior to their leaving. One study explained how in 2017 only 1% of Eritreans had access to the internet (Van Reisen et al., 2019). National and community-level differences were emphasized by the Mixed Migration Centre's study, which noted the significant discrepancies whereby:

> migrants and refugees from Cameroon (78 percent), Nigeria (68 percent) and Togo (62 percent) have the highest rates of smartphone usage whereas those from Niger (65 percent), Burkina Faso (45 percent) and Senegal (41 percent) most often report using a non-smartphone. Not having access to any type of phone is most often reported by people from Burkina Faso (15 percent), Côte d'Ivoire (13 percent) and Senegal (11 percent). (Mixed Migration Centre, 2019)

In Haywood's study, it was only the migrant originating from Eritrea who indicated that he had not needed a phone for navigation and communication, while all the remaining migrants who originated from regions of the Middle East indicated that they had used technology for their information needs (Haywood, 2016: 78). While the sample size of six is very small, it does reflect the absence of research looking at ICTs and social media in migration among African migrants and may also be indicative that for many migrants, longstanding communication and information networks have not necessarily been fundamentally altered by new technologies.

1. The role of ICTs and social media in the pre-migration context

Information campaigns targeting communities from which many migrants originate have been a longstanding policy tool, particularly by destination countries that are looking for relatively low-cost interventions to reduce inbound migration and by international organizations that provide humanitarian support. The EU, the International Organization for Migration and the UNHCR have been at the forefront of such efforts. A range of communications techniques are employed, from 'peer meetings', whereby recent migrants (typically, people who had irregular trajectories and

suffered harm in transit countries or were sent back from Europe) share their experiences with their 'home' communities, to theatre productions, songs, radio programmes and, increasingly, social media campaigns. The effectiveness of these targeted information interventions is unclear, partly because the monitoring and evaluation reports are not always made publicly available and many of the evaluations that are available rely on cross-sectional surveys of some participants sampled at convenience (Dunsch et al., 2019: 15). These campaigns are typically grounded in the assumption that if migrants had better, more accurate, information about the potential challenges and dangers of the journey, they would choose not to migrate through irregular paths. We know, however, that this is not necessarily the case as many people are forced to leave home or calculate the potential costs of staying versus the risks of leaving and believe that they can mitigate some potential pitfalls (Van Bemmel, 2020).

When it comes to the precise role that ICTs and social media might play in facilitating or encouraging migration prior to departure, the evidence was comparably vague. Across almost all the studies, there was a clear indication that ICTs and social media had not transplanted the traditional role of social networks. These networks were still crucial to decision-making, and when ICTs are used, they have primarily been employed as a tool to engage with existing members of migrants' social networks. As Dekker and Engbersen (2014: 415) explained, 'offline resources are still preferred over online support networks'. Similarly, a Mixed Migration Centre (2019) report which interviewed 2,535 migrants from Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso indicated that their main sources of information prior to departure were ' [f]riends and family in the country of destination (53%) and origin (43%) and calling others that are ahead on migration routes (42%)'. Furthermore, this report also indicated that less than 30% had used social media for migration information prior to departure. The data on the extent to which social media contributes to the 'greener pastures' principle, namely the widely-held idea in regions of origin that reaching a European destination will inevitably improve one's quality of life, is also unclear. There is some evidence that mainstream media, and specifically television (more than printed press or radio) does have some effect (European Commission, 2018: 7) but evidence specifically considering this phenomenon in relation to social media is missing.

The focus on existing social networks was also emphasized by the study completed by Sanchez *et al*. (2018) which produced a report on the communication channels used by migrants and asylum seekers in Italy and included a survey of more than 650 migrants among its methods. Their analysis of the data found that 'face-to-face and/or verbal interactions were preferred over other forms of communication' and that 'migrants consult with family and friends most often through ordinary phone calls' as 'the use of apps for communication appears to be limited given the poor state of the internet infrastructure in many of the migrants' countries of origin' (Sanchez et al., 2018: 7).

Where there are examples of the use of social media, these seem to be first and foremost as a communications medium, rather than a source of new information from people not known already to the migrant. For example, in Kutscher and Kreß's study (2018: 6) of unaccompanied minor refugees, a young boy articulated how central Facebook especially for maintaining a relationship with his family back home and letting them know that he was ok. Similarly, Sanchez et al. clarified that 'social media is not used to collect information concerning migratory journeys' and that '[n]ot a single migrant […] indicated relying on social media for that purpose' (Sanchez et al., 2018: 44). This is echoed in the aforementioned European Commission report, which explained:

> migrants (potential or in transit) use open content on social media less often as a source

> of information on migration. Social media is very much used to communicate, mainly with the diaspora in Europe or family and friends in countries of origin, but rarely used as a source of migration information' [and] 'Social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber) plays a limited role in migration-related decisions. Its most important role is as a conduit for communication with friends, family and acquaintances abroad who are the most trusted source of information about migration for migrant. (European Commission, 2018: 39)

In terms of seeking the assistance of smugglers, recent research points heavily to the reliance on existing networks. There is a strong dependence on obtaining information from those who have already made the journey, as a Ghanaian man from Crawley *et al*.'s study (2016: 54) explained: 'If you want to travel [across the sea] you call a friend who has been before, and they say who to go to'. This is also represented in their overall data which clarifies that: 'contrary to suggestions in the media that refugees and migrants predominantly located smugglers via Facebook or WhatsApp, just five of those interviewed in Greece told us that this is how they located a smuggler, and none on the Central Mediterranean route' (Crawley et al., 2016: 54). Somewhat cognate findings are echoed by Whittle and Antonopoulos (2020) in their qualitative study into how Eritreans plan, fund and manage irregular migration. Their study, which involved in-depth interviews with 30 Eritreans who had undertaken illegal migration, openly challenges the 'assumption […] that information and communication technologies have been instrumental in the planning of irregular migration and identifying smugglers to facilitate migration' (Whittle and Antonopoulos, 2020: 1). Their conclusions showed that 'none of the migrants interviewed suggested that it [ICTs] played a significant part' and that 'human smugglers, who facilitate irregular migration of Eritreans, get involved in small-scale smuggling operations that do not require sophisticated use of ICT' (Whittle and Antonopoulos, 2020: 15). Sanchez et al.'s study (2018: 8) of migrants in Italy came to comparable findings indicating that 'decisions to travel with individual facilitators or brokers are made through personal interactions, direct phone calls and text messaging via SMS and, when available, WhatsApp'. This is in line with the findings offered in the European Commission report on West African migrants that argued:

> potential migrants from across the region rely on word-of-mouth communication to devise and implement migration plans. In contrast to other major regions of origin, such as Afghanistan, people smugglers play a diminished role in motivating migration journeys, and their presence on social media is a 'red herring', distracting from primary migration decision-making processes. Despite smugglers' evident presence online, most migrants engage their services face-to-face or by personal recommendation, usually after arriving in smuggling hubs such as Agadez. (European Commission, 2018: 7)

Together, these studies raise some questions about the emphasis on ICT and social media campaigns by destination governments and NGOs such as the UNHCR to inform populations about the risks of some of these journeys and the possible likely outcomes. These deterrent-based approaches have been considered by several studies including Brekke and Beyer (2019) which interviewed migrants in Khartoum and investigated the role of information on migrants decisions in transit as well as the impact of these social media campaigns. They concluded that while only a few had seen the campaigns investigated 'the informants perceived this information as credible, [but] they did not see [these campaigns] as bringing new information' (Brekke and Beyer, 2019: 44) and felt that they already had the information they needed.

2. Use of ICTs and social media during the journey

In contrast with the use of ICTs and social media prior to departure, there is comparatively less evidence of ICT and social media use for African migrants during the journey.

This can be for several reasons including the prevalence of criminal organizations, or human smuggling networks, in guiding migrants, particularly within Africa to the Mediterranean (UNODC, 2011); the continued violence, detention and persecution of migrants in major transit areas, such as Libya (where many migrants are stripped of all belongings, if they had not already been taken) (Belloni, 2016; Hamood, 2008); and the general unspeakable tragedy and atrocities faced on the journey which leaves many traumatized (Steel et al., 2017). The evidence that exist suggests the continued importance of interpersonal relationships along the journey.

Our review brought several studies to the fore, including Merisalo and Jauhiainen's (2019: 7) quantitative analysis of close to 2,500 surveys, which indicated that respondents from Africa used the internet less during their journey than they had in their country of origin. Furthermore, of the Africans who answered the survey (which included a mix of individuals from Algeria, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Somalia and Nigeria, among others), 12% of those who participated in Greece and 37% who participated in Italy had not accessed the internet at all during their journey (Merisalo and Jauhiainen, 2019: 10). They also noted in the Greek case study that Middle Eastern migrants were more likely to have a smartphone than African migrants (68% compared with 55%), highlighting again the difficulties of extrapolating findings across regions and the very different journeys faced by African migrants compared with those coming from other regions (Steel et al., 2017).

Frouws et al. (2016) offered a typology of the ways in which ICT is used along mixed migration routes, generally along the framework that one might expect. These uses included obtaining updated information on route, initiating contact with smugglers, accessing data on the country of destination, using them to facilitate safety and rescue on route as well as providing a platform for migrant and refugee voices. While each of these examples was provided with evidence of cases, it did not offer an assessment as to the scale of each of these forms of use, and how widespread they are.

In terms of the prevalence of social media platform usage, the EU report indicated that Facebook, while still being the most important social media source for informing migrants about the journey and destination, is still infrequently used during migration (European Commission, 2018: 40). There was very little research that considered whether migrants used social media to publicly share the details of their journey. A rare exception to this was a subset of the study by Sanchez et al. (2018) which involved a social media and social network analysis of a subset of 21 individuals, including 11 individuals from Bangladesh and 10 from Nigeria. While the sample size is small, there was a notable distinction between these two population groups, indicating that 'information about the journeys themselves remain absent from the publicly available posts among Nigerian migrants [and] only Bangladeshi migrants opted to upload pictures of segments of their journeys' (Sanchez et al., 2018: 44).

There is some evidence highlighting how a mobile phone may be both an asset and a risk during a journey. Several studies cited migrants who thought it was risky to carry a phone during their journeys as it could be used to extort money from their relatives in order to ensure their safe return (most notably Van Esseveld, 2019). There were also more general concerns among certain populations, such as those who have come from Eritrea, where 'fear of an all-controlling State and state surveillance of ICT were noticeable, [… and m]ost said the fear was not so much for them [… but] more for the family and friends they were contacting back in Eritrea' (Opas and McMurray, 2015: 118). There was also a reticence for the use of social media in some cases, as explained in the work of Witteborn (2015: 355) where some of her interviewees from Cameroon were concerned about

surveillance and therefore refrained from using certain platforms such as Skype or Facebook, an unease that persisted even though they had arrived in their destination.

The research reflects the limitations of obtaining empirical data about social media during journeys. Major transit areas, such as the coastal regions of Libya, or key towns in the Sahara such as Agadez in Niger or the border region of eastern Sudan, are very difficult and dangerous to access. Penetrating the criminal networks that facilitate migrants poses security challenges that also offer severe constraints on obtaining verifiable data. While there are credible reports and interviews with migrants about the way these criminal networks use social media, and mobile technology, to extort ransom payments from migrants families,[10] there is more research to be done that unpacks how this system operates, the rules and norms that govern it and how technology has fundamentally changed (if at all) longstanding criminal networks that have facilitated irregular migration and evolved and adapted over the decades to changing political, technological and economic situations (Hascek et al., 2017).

3. Technologies on arrival

Throughout the journey technological needs may change, and unsurprisingly the same is true upon arrival in Europe. While some articles referred back to the persistence of the 'digital divide', even in Europe, where the high cost of calls and data may mean mobile phones may largely be used for specific day-to-day needs rather than communicating back home (Haywood, 2016), or where an ID may be required to access SIM cards in some countries (UNHCR Innovation Service, n.d.: 19), with increasing access to free Wi-Fi networks, particularly in cities, and free tools such as WhatsApp, the cost of connectivity is dropping. This challenge has partly been addressed by the growing cohort of organizations and companies providing free internet access to those in refugee camps, including more established camps, or accommodation provided for migrants by local charities in places like northern Italy. Groups such as NetHope, Disaster Tech Lab as well as partnerships between UNHCR and Facebook, Cisco and Google, have all been at the forefront of these efforts, but they have not necessarily provided unfettered connectivity. There has been controversy over what sites people have access to (with Facebook prioritizing Facebook and its partner applications associated with internet.org), the amount of data users are able to download (making data-heavy video calls, or live video posts, such as Facebook Live or YouTube) difficult, and even when users can access the internet, with reports of it being switched off in camps during the evening or only available during certain hours.[11] How and, for what purpose, recent arrivals use mobile phones and social media is often assumed, but there are actually few compressive studies of this among African migrants in Europe. While these organizations typically frame their provision of connectivity in a rights-based framework (e.g., connectivity as a human right), there are few public evaluations of how migrants are making use of these tools. It may, for example, be assumed that the primary use of social media and the internet is for accessing online resources and information about refugee services, education, finding a job or resettlement, while the vast majority of use may be for entertainment purposes, including chatting with friends, dating or watching videos (Felton, 2012). NGOs and intergovernmental organizations have increasingly been working to attempt to diagnose the information needs of recent migrants. BBC Media Action, for example, conducted a rigorous and extensive study on communities from Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria in Greece, and put forward a variety of areas where they needed more urgent information (including legal advice and updated information about the current situation in the camps) and the mediums of communication which were primarily face to face, while internet access was critical for remaining connected with their family at home (BBC Media Action, 2016).

One of the articles that did consider the different forms of social media use after arriving in Europe was Charmarkeh (2013), who investigated the use of social media by Somalis in France (this was, however, one of the older texts). The key platforms that it highlighted were MSN Messenger and Skype, as well as Facebook. While the paper identified these platforms as ones that were used, it was not able to enter into significant discussion regarding the content and degree of use (including popularity among users). While the evidence is emerging that Facebook is the preferred platform for many migrants, more attention needs to be directed at how pages and profiles are being used. For example, some findings from preliminary research the authors are engaged in suggesting that Somali migrants in Italy, devoted significant attention to curating a particular persona on Facebook, often with different profiles and pages targeting different communities such as friends and family back home, potential relationship partners in Italy or educational and job opportunities.

III. Conclusion

This article has sought to get behind the headlines—both positive and negative—about how ICTs are transforming migration. A focus on assessing and understanding the strength of evidence is an important aspect of more informed policy-making and more targeted interventions. In the context of humanitarian crises and migration, in particular, there is a tendency to jump on the latest technology and romanticize how it might transform the capacity of those intervening or of those migrating. This approach is also evident in the broader divides within the humanitarian tech sector, both those that have focussed on the individually empowering aspects of technology and those that have stressed how such technologies might be used to control and erode the privacy rights and autonomy of an already vulnerable group. There is a relatively robust and longstanding body of research around how African diaspora communities are using social media to engage in politics in their countries of origin (Gagliardone and Stremlau, 2011), and increasingly, the evidence is also suggesting that significant online hate speech, including in posts as well as Facebook Live or YouTube videos, is produced by individuals abroad adding a transnational dimension to addressing this content (Gagliardone et al., 2016).

Many of the seminal papers on ICTs and migration were picked up by both the systematic database search and the recommendations of experts. However, as mentioned previously, much of this work has focussed on refugees from Syria and Afghanistan, and so was not directly relevant to the scope of this review. These works offer a point of comparison, especially since they have been generalized as representative of the experience of other migrant communities. Many used Syrian refugees as their case study showing how they use social media information both before and during their journeys (Dekker et al., 2018: 9), as well as illustrating how these technologies being empowered migrants to better plan their own journeys (Zijlstra and Liempt, 2017: 183). They elaborated how mobile phones are 'both a resource and a threat' (Gillespie et al., 2016: 2) and focussed on some issues associated with the arrival in Europe, including how 'the appearance of digitally connected refugees was perceived as incongruent with Eurocentric ideas of sad and poor refugees fleeing from war and atrocities' (Leurs and Ponzanesi, 2018: 6). Overall, this literature emphasized how these technologies can fulfil a range of purposes, including 'as a companion, an organizational hub, a lifeline and a diversion' (Alencar et al., 2019: 841). As this systematic review has illustrated, however, there is significantly less evidence available on the use of ICT and social media in African migration pathways. This semi-systematic review has been unable to find clear evidence of a general reliance on ICTs and social media during all stages of a journey. This is not to say that it does not exist, but it highlights the considerable gaps within the literature and demonstrates how ungrounded

many assumptions may be, particularly when they involve interventions such as social media campaigns aimed at discouraging migrants to leave the continent or strategies to provide for 'information needs' for recent arrivals.

Finally, one unintentional but significant finding of our evidence review has been the extent to which the literature that formed our final corpus for analysis came from western scholars. We explicitly tried to address this in the methodology by reaching out to experts and centres on the continent, and search through depositories of African theses on the continent, but research production on migration (particularly Africa–EU migration) remains centred on the global north. While a number of the African migration centres have examined the role of media (and sometimes social media) they have tended to focus on local or national case studies.[12] This reinforces calls for diversifying, decolonizing and strengthening the opportunities for African research centres and universities to take a leading role in empirical research production across the continent, and in Europe, as well.

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Notes

1. An estimated 1% are actively planning to migrate. See Natale et al. (2018).
2. ConflictNet (The Politics and Practice of SocialMedia in Conflict). For more information, please see https://pcmlp.socleg.ox.ac.uk/.
3. These interviews were conducted in 2019.
4. Zuckerberg, for example, has made such a claim in the case of Columbia's long ongoing war and in recent comments he suggested that if Facebook had been active in 2003, perhaps the USA would not have gone to war with Iraq. See Price (2019) and Zuckerberg (2017).
5. A semi-systematic approach over a more structured and systematic review is preferable due to the diverse methodologies used in the social sciences, and the size and nature of the samples.
6. We recognize the challenges that are involved with incorporating grey literature but determined that the advantages of doing so were more significant than the possible disadvantages. To exclude this literature would limit the potential studies we could review substantially. For further discussion on this issue, see (Benzies et al., 2006).
7. At the end of 2019, an estimated 45% of the population or 477 million people had mobile phone subscriptions (GSMA, 2020).
8. Unlike the medical and STEM disciplines, titles and abstracts of many articles in the social sciences do not necessarily give a definitive indication as to the contents, sample and methods used in a particular article. As has been indicated by other scholars working on similar types of evidence assessments, they also include a larger number of theoretical articles whose findings are not based upon empirical data, but are still key texts in certain fields. We did not automatically exclude these texts, but many did not deal directly with the focus on migrants of African origin, and therefore many of these types of publications did not make it through to the final review based on these criteria.
9. As is to be expected, the vast majority of these texts were in English, and while foreign language texts were not systematically removed, only a relatively small number were picked up. Those that were picked up were sorted in the same way that the English texts relying on either the foreign language knowledge of the researchers involved or the help of an online translation tool.
10. Apart from reports about how social media has been used to track down family members, social networks and those that might be willing to pay towards the ransom, there have been examples where videos of abuse have been publicly posted on social media to encourage family members to pay ransom (see, for example: https://www.africanews.com/2017/06/16/libyan-smugglers-post-abuse-of-migrants-on-social-media-for-ransom-un//)
11. Author interview with Somali migrants in Milan, Italy.
12. Universities and institutes contacted include the University of Ghana, the Kenyan Institute of Migration Studies, Peace and Development Centre in Ethiopia, the American University in Cairo, the University of the Witwatersrand and Addis Ababa University, among others.

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