

News from the Levant: A Qualitative Research on the Role of Social Media in Syrian Diaspora

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Abstract

The Syrian emergency, with around 6.7 million people leaving the country, is considered the biggest refugee crisis since the end of World War II. The impact of social media on both the representation of the crisis and immigrants' behavior has been already analyzed in several works. In this context, the article contains the results of qualitative research on the use of social media by Syrian immigrants and refugees after the civil war and in the diaspora. By mainly focusing on young users, we completed 44 in-depth interviews: 22 in-person interviews in Jordan; 13 in-person interviews in Lebanon; and 9 interviews with immigrant and refugees in Turkey via Skype (for logistical reasons). The article is dedicated to three different uses of social media: collecting news regarding the war in Syria; rediscovering lost ties after the diaspora; and finally, the so-called resettlement or the organization of a new life in host countries. As to the findings, immigrants have been shown to use social media for all purposes, but to a very different degree. In addition, and more interestingly, the results revealed some blind spots of digital sociability, such as the lack of credible sources and the Balkanization brought about by the so-called Web 2.0.

Keywords

social media, diaspora, qualitative research, youth, ethnography

Surprised that Syrian refugees have smartphones?
Sorry to break this to you, but you're an idiot.

(James O' Malley, "Independent," September 7, 2015)

About the Syrian Crisis

With more than 6.7 million people leaving the country since 2013, the Syrian refugee crisis is considered the biggest one since World War II. According to the UN Refugee Agency, the countries with the highest numbers of Syrian refugees are Jordan with 660,000, Lebanon with 1 million, and Turkey with 3.6 million people (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019)—the three border countries on which our research is focused.

Such a process has been framed in terms of a *diaspora*—and we will do so, inevitably—even though the semantic area covered by the term deserves some clarification. Strictly speaking, a diaspora would require certain specific conditions: a dispersion from an original and mythologized homeland, the reconnecting of multiple communities, and a struggle to get back home; the definition is mostly drawn from the Armenian and Hebrew cases and is therefore exclusive (Clifford, 1994, p. 304). Whereas, in a common and

weak sense, we can refer to diaspora as a generic dispersion process so that the term “has become a synecdoche, the part—diaspora—standing for the whole,” eventually acting as a synonym of forced mobility (Tölölyan, 2012, p. 5). As Rogers Brubaker (2000, pp. 1–3) stated, in its current interpretation, the concept of diaspora rather deals with three more common conditions: the dispersion process itself, the abandoned land, and the problematic relocation in a host country.

The Syrian case has been also analyzed for the recognized role of digital media in the uprisings, the civil war, and the immigration itself (Ahmad & Hamasaheed, 2015; Lynch et al., 2014; Rohde et al., 2016). The role of new media has been explained in terms of a “digital infrastructure for global movements,” acting at all levels: social platforms, instant messaging, money transfers, online maps, charging stations, translation websites, and Wi-Fi hotspots (Latonero & Kift, 2018, p. 3). All these tools actually give

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shape to a “connective route” for migrants, contrasted by the “securitized route” due to both political and *technical* regulators, such as monitoring software, geo-localization services, and even the use of TripAdvisor for spotting immigrants in touristic areas (Sánchez-Querubín & Rogers, 2018). In other words, digital media do not simply favor the empowerment of immigrants or, on the opposite, border control strategies: they rather constitute the *whole ecosystem* in which migration processes take place. What is true at the material level is also true at the symbolic level, as shown by an analysis of the representation of refugee crisis on a sample of 7.5 million tweets, which—by applying Zizi Papacharissi’s (2015) concept of affective publics—reveals how the issue has been used by all political sides for their own ideological purposes, making Twitter the overall and “equivocal” arena of a global debate (Siapera et al., 2018).

While the above-quoted surveys are inspired by a systematic interest in the overall role of digital media, our analysis focused on immigrants’ life stories and their use of social media, as collected by means of in-depth interviews. By mainly focusing on young users, we completed 44 in-depth interviews: 22 in-person interviews in Jordan, 13 in-person interviews in Lebanon, and 9 interviews with immigrants and refugees in Turkey via Skype (for logistical reasons). The article is dedicated to three different uses of social media: collecting news regarding the war in Syria, rediscovering lost ties after the diaspora, and finally, the so-called resettlement or the organization of a new life in host countries. Research questions therefore included:

the use of social media for gathering news and the selection of reliable sources and fact-checking;

the use of social media for getting back in touch with one’s acquaintances;

the use of social media and smartphones for organizing the travel;

the use of social media for collecting information about host countries;

the role of social media, or Facebook groups and online communities, for organizing one’s new life.

Literature Review: The Role of Social Media in the Diaspora

The role of media and information in migration processes is a well-discussed issue, already interpreted against the backdrop of such concepts as “disjunctural flows” (Appadurai, 1996), “transnational ties” (Vertovec, 2009, p. 61), or “transnational engagement” enabled by the web (Brinkerhoff, 2009). In recent years, though, this idea has been put to the test of new frames: after the crisis of global rhetoric, new approaches are spreading that deal with the *concrete* use of

Table 1. Interviewed in Turkey.

Name	Age	Gender	City of provenience	City of residence
Adham	19	M	Damascus	Kilis
Ahlam	26	M	Aleppo	Kilis
Ghada	26	F	Aleppo	Gaziantep
Karima	34	F	Damascus	Istanbul
Lilas	33	F	Damascus	Istanbul
Mushin	20	M	A’zaz	Kilis
Suheil	31	M	Damascus	Istanbul
Tamara	27	F	Dar’a	Gaziantep
Zakimohammad	20	M	Aleppo area	Kilis

Table 2. Interviewed in Lebanon.

Name	Age	Gender	City of provenience	City of residence
Aamir	19	M	Homs	Beirut
Ahmed	23	M	Aleppo	Douris
Ali	25	M	Damascus	Beirut
Amal	27	F	Tartus	Jounieh
Fadi	19	M	Darayya	Douris
Fahad	21	M	Damascus	Beirut
Fatima	22	F	Tartus	Beirut
Manaar	21	F	Damascus	Beirut
Mohammad	25	M	Aleppo	Douris
Mohammad	27	M	Damascus	Jounieh
Nabeel	20	M	Damascus area	Douris
Naila	22	F	Homs	Beirut
Salwa	21	F	Damascus	Beirut

devices made by immigrants, rather than with multiculturalism as such. In this perspective, we completed qualitative field research on the use of social media by young Syrians in three border countries: Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan (see Tables 1–3). When compared with other studies, we made no distinctions among migrants, asylum-seekers, and refugees, because this distinction actually depends on each country’s legislation rather than on the people’s experience, which is what we were interested in.

Although the importance of mediated communication in migration processes can easily be understood, Yang-Soo Kim defined the most used framework, by analyzing the “cross-cultural” adaptation of Americans in South Korea and Asians in the West. Kim’s (2008) model is based on the relationship between individual communication competence—the “cognitive, affective and operational capacity to communicate in accordance with the host communication symbols and meaning systems” (p. 508)—and “host social communication.” “Ethnic social communication” also plays a part, by providing a sub-cultural mediation for the adaptation process to the new environment. In the end, adaptation will depend on the concrete relationships

Table 3. Interviewed in Jordan.

Name	Age	Gender	City of provenience	City of residence
Abn Al Azis	22	M	A village near Al Jeezah	Zarqa
Ahmad	25	M	Damascus	Zarqa
Ahmed	21	M	Damascus	Zarqa
Ala'a	26	F	Aleppo	Amman
Ali	25	M	Damascus	Zarqa
Atef	24	M	Aleppo	Amman
Fadia	19	F	Damascus	Zarqa
Farida	20	F	Damascus	Zarqa
Fatima	21	F	Damascus	Russeifa
Haya	23	F	Dar'a	Amman
Ibrahim	24	M	Tartus	Azraq
Israa	28	F	Damascus	Zarqa
Mohammad	27	M	Darayya	Zarqa
Mohammad	26	M	Damascus	Amman
Mohammad	23	M	Damascus	Amman
Mohammad	22	M	Damascus	Zarqa
Mohammad	21	M	Damascus	Zarqa
Mohammed	26	M	Damascus	Al Jerash
Mohammed	19	M	Al Harah	Zarqa
Rida	42	M	Dar'a	Azraq
Youssuf	33	M	Al Jeezah	Amman
Wafaa	24	F	Damascus	Zarqa

between the features of the environment—receptivity, conformity pressure, and ethnic composition—and the corresponding levels of individual competence: preparedness for the new environment, ethnic proximity, and adaptive skills (Kim & Kim, 2016, p. 64). By definition, digital media provide immigrants with more information about the country they are destined to—and they can also affect other dimensions in an unpredictable way, therefore modifying the equilibrium of Kim's model. In our case, in particular, social media will reveal to strengthen the intermediate level of sub-cultural mediation, so that “ethnic social communication” will turn into a defensive attitude—namely, the pre-eminence of intra-cultural connection among Syrians over intercultural connection between the Syrians and the others.

The mass diffusion of social media, smartphones, geolocalization, and Wi-Fi—a frame Rainie and Wellman (2012) famously refer to as a new “social operating system” (pp. 3–12)—has suddenly modified this scenario. As a consequence, immigrants have gained a new level of autonomy, including in the choice of routes to follow. Traditionally, the deciding factors in the choice of destination country have been supposed to be the economic and cultural status of immigrants, the organization of both legal and illegal routes, and the collection of information during the travel (Kuschminder et al., 2015 p. 67). As to the last aspect, the unlimited availability of online content has made a huge difference. In their research on illegal immigration through

Greece and Turkey, for instance, Zijlstra and Van Liempt (2017) showed how the 24/7 presence of information in social media—about the location of ethnic communities, of the most practicable border or even of corruptible functionaries—has been making immigration routes less predictable and more unstable. The use of social media—although often limited to young and cultivated people—appears to modify the immigration process in a non-predictable way: rather than favoring the spread of knowledge and therefore multicultural integration, it is actually empowering the immigrant as a single player and making their journey more difficult to control (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). In his fieldwork on the Spanish enclave of Ceuta, Michael Collyer (2007) proposed the definition of the “do-it-yourself migrant,” which is immigration characterized by “fragmented journeys,” small-scale organization, and temporary networks in transit areas. This new form of immigration, Collyer (2007) argues, is only made possible by low-cost digital media, universally accessible services, and ubiquitous money transfers, which have radically changed migration routes and the Saharan landscape as well (p. 674).

Syrian immigration is actually part of this historical trend, and many studies have been made on its close connection to social network sites and digital media. Veronis et al. (2018) realized a series of focus groups with 29 Syrians, aged 16 to 25 years, established in Ottawa, Canada. In their analysis, social media act as “contact zones,” or transcultural integration places: spaces where refugees can learn local rules, by exercising a higher “degree of agency” in the process of resettlement. When compared with the off-line experience, they argue, social media provide immigrants with a strong “sense of control”: so that, for instance, they can easily switch to Arabic in case of need, or they can observe emerging local tendencies on Snapchat or Instagram (Veronis et al., 2018, pp. 82–86). Dekker et al. (2018) interviewed 54 Syrian refugees in Holland about the use of digital media during the different stages of migration. As a result, social media in the strict sense was revealed to be useful for information gathering *before* departure and *after* arrival—through Facebook groups as “Syrians in Holland”—while during the trip, migrants mostly used Google Maps and instant messaging services, SIM cards being widely available on the black market. More relevant, however, was that social media data overload could not resolve the lack of reliable information typical of migrants' experience, while eventually becoming part of the same problem. When it comes to fact checking, indeed, people mainly referred to their own acquaintances and to relatives and friends they could trust—to the point that the digital browsing was joined with the use of consolidated networks or, to put it in Mistral's (1996, 2000) words, of “existing ties.”

From a similar perspective, Amanda Alencar interviewed 18 refugees from Syria, Eritrea, and Afghanistan living in Europe. The goal of her research was to investigate the use of social media for four different purposes: “mean and markers,”

the search for information about the hosting country; “social connections,” the building of a social world through both bridging and bonding practices (see Putnam, 2000); “social facilitators,” the attempt to integrate in the new context, for instance, using social media to propose a positive image of immigrants; and finally, the so-called “foundation,” the participation in community and political life in a broader sense. Alencar (2018) found that the use of social media showed a little importance for foundation purposes and, what was more surprising, for *mean and markers*-tagged activities, while Facebook was really useful for consolidating social ties and making possible the integration between different ethnic groups (pp. 1596–1599). Different results are shown by an original study of the Syrian diaspora in Italy, through the analysis of 1,800 images uploaded on the Facebook page “The Syrian Community in Italy,” which revealed that the use of Facebook can help build a collective Syrian identity and reaching a new ideal definition of Syrian society—although both definitions are based on a univocal point of view, antagonist to Assad’s regime (Al-Rawi & Fahmy, 2018).

Studies have been made also concerning the use of social media by Syrians living in refugee camps, in particular in the Zaatari Jordanian camp. The results provided a backdrop for understanding the interviews we completed with people living in spontaneous settlements in Bekaa Valley, East Lebanon (with the difference that in Lebanon, there are no official camps for Syrian refugees). Wall et al. (2015) conducted 10 focus groups on the use of mobile phone in the Zaatari camp, to analyze the five dimensions of “information precarity”: technological limits to access; the spread of dangerous or irrelevant information; the lack of control over their own image; surveillance by the Syrian state, a few miles away from the border; and the disruption of social ties and support. The results of their research—which is “not quite a story of refugee empowerment”—are actually discouraging, as they contest the idea “that merely having a cell phone solves information problems” (Wall et al., 2015 p. 14), but rather reveal all of the tactical adjustments through which people try to tackle the five issues. Hence, a series of conflicts arose: between men, who walk with a mobile in their pocket, and women, especially the elders, who do not; between Syrians and visitors, who take pictures without permission, thus jeopardizing immigrants’ self-representation; and finally, the conflict against censorship, through the alternating use of Jordanian and Syrian SIM cards, both of which are available in the camp’s souk.

Rohde et al. (2016) detected similar problems when interviewing four Syrian refugees in Germany and 10 Syrian refugees in Turkey, all living in precarious conditions. Although all interviewed people used social network sites, staying in touch with relatives and friends proved to be difficult due to government censorship, the state of Syrian infrastructure and limitations to web access, and as a result, many declared they had not had news from their

acquaintances for 2 to 9 months (Rohde et al., 2016, p. 524). Xu and Maitland (2016) realized a broader analysis through the administration of 200 “pen-and-paper” questionnaires in the Zaatari camp. The results of the survey cannot be taken as optimistic signs, as they show, for instance, that 6% of the sample had quit using the web once in Jordan. On the other hand, though, the research maps the uses of different platforms. The most quoted information sources are, not surprisingly, Google, Facebook, and YouTube, while Viber, WhatsApp, and mobile voice are the preferred channels for social interaction—though the use of mobile voice is put at risk by the limits of infrastructure in war zones, as our interviews will confirm. Differences also emerge between genders and age classes, so that, for instance, the use of WhatsApp is more common among men than women, although the number of people interviewed does not allow any generalization.

As to gender differences—which hardly emerge in our interviews—there is no agreement among different studies. In Xu and Maitland’s work, they are limited to a few minor practices, while Veronis et al. (2018, p. 97) noticed that participant gender does not affect the use of social media. Ahmed and Veronis (2017) refer to a “nuanced difference” between male and female Syrian refugees, with the latter making a more frequent use of social media for educational purposes, which is a tendency that is confirmed by our interviews in Jordan. By taking a radical side, Katty Alhayek speaks about the “double marginalization” of Syrian female refugees, combining the problems typical of women and those typical of asylum-seekers. In her perspective, the problem has to do with the overlap between the orientalist representation provided by the global media and the “self-orientalist” representation produced by the women themselves on social media through the adoption of the very same stereotypes—as in the case of the Facebook campaign “Refugees Not Captives,” launched by a group of Syrian women in 2012 (Alhayek, 2014, p. 607).

Besides this last issue, the literature review helps to isolate some of the main aspects: the changing role of social media in the different stages of migration process (before, during, and after); the precariousness of digital sociality, which is not able per se to solve crisis situations; the do-it-yourself nature of immigration during the digital age; and finally, the different uses of new platforms, ranging from the rediscovery of missing ties, to resettlement. As to our research, the in-depth interviews will only deal with some of these practices and provide a confirmation of previous findings, while also detecting a specific problem of digital sociability. To be more precise, we will put to the test three main hypothesis emerged from literature review:

the variable function of social media in the different stages of migration processes, as in Alencar (2018) and Dekker et al. (2018);

the specific role played by social media as forms of sub-cultural mediation or “contact zones” (Kim & Kim, 2016; Veronis et al., 2018);

the very particular use of social media in extreme conditions, as refugee camps of informal habitations (Wall et al., 2015).

On the very contrary, we will not deal with other findings, and namely with gender issues (Alhayek, 2014), and, more broadly speaking, with the use of digital devices for organizing the migration routes (Collyer, 2007; Zijlstra & Van Liempt, 2017), as we will rather try to introduce a new variable. When compared with the existing literature, as a matter of fact, our approach has a key difference. In actuality, almost all research on digital diaspora shows a lack of interest in internet-based theories, which means that their frameworks have little to do with the specificities of mediated communication. For this purpose, we will also take into account a principal issue in media theory: the tension between the affordance of the web for the extension of social networks on one hand and the so-called “balkanization” on the other. This tendency does not come as surprise, if one considers how social network sites favor bonding practices and the consolidation of walled gardens, rather than bridging activities (boyd, 2014, pp. 153–175; boyd & Ellison, 2008). In this sense, the risk brought about by social networks is referred to as a “balkanization” tendency: the splitting of society into homogeneous, separate, and isolated factions. As far as the social networks mostly connect individuals with people they already know and agree with, and as far as, internet users are increasingly exposed to information sources and socialization patterns they have chosen in advance, they will be more likely to wall themselves off from the rest of the world, and in so doing pose a threat to the equilibrium of society at large. A real democratic debate, Cass Sunstein (2007) points out, requires frequent “unplanned, unanticipated encounters” with others and their unpredictable opinions, while the Web 2.0 basically relies on a series of “echo chambers”—such as the social networks—where people are only exposed to the existing relationships, to the information consistent with their own point of view, and to “opinions and topics of their own choosing” (pp. 5–13). Our findings show that the very same tendency is affecting the use of social media on the part of immigrants and asylum-seekers.

There is actually a hidden aspect in the positive feedback between the spread of social networks and the strengthening of social capital, which is the rise of close, homogeneous environments, separated from each other, as shown, for instance, by the marginalization of dissonant opinions. The polarizing effects of social media have already been observed (Manjoo, 2008; Sunstein, 2017), and the separation between communities comes as a natural consequence. As we shall see, Balkanization also affects the use of social media on the part of Syrian refugees, with some significant effects on the integration process as a whole.

Methodological Note and Ethical Issues

Interviews with Syrian immigrants and refugees in Turkey have been realized on Skype in June 2018; the in-presence interviews in Jordan, in July 2018; and the in-presence interviews in Lebanon, finally, in December 2018. Our groups were selected by means of a common technique, the so-called snowball; following a consolidated procedure, local gatekeepers were involved, before the field stage, for the selection of those being interviewed (Charmarkeh, 2013; Kutscher & Kress, 2018). In all cases, the individual interviews were conducted in English, lasted around 45 min, and were audio-recorded. The focus on youth, on the other hand, was due to the fact that young people are usually heavy users of new devices and platforms, and such a choice makes possible a comparison with the most significant research focused on uses and effects of social media (boyd, 2014; Janmohamed, 2016; Turkle, 2011; Twenge, 2017).

When it comes to refugees, methodological problems also bring ethical issues due to the vulnerability of those being interviewed—a vulnerability that we need to assume and even to understand and trace during the field work *with* Syrian users, not to mention that we need to understand the feeling that such a research is even “trivial, in a context of urgent, basic, human needs” (Gillespie et al., 2018, p. 4). For a similar reason, we did our best to avoid any “spectacularization” of personal stories (Leurs & Smets, 2018) as well as any question likely to jeopardize people’s freedom, feelings of security or asylum-seeker status (Borkert et al., 2018)—namely, questions directly related to illegal practices or critical political issues. The research has been presented to those being interviewed as a purely scientific initiative to be published only in scientific journals, as is actually the case. In all cases, family names have been removed for the sake of privacy.

Looking Back: “Sometimes It’s Better Not to Know”

The first function of social media among refugees, which we will describe shortly, is to bring news about Syrian events; this is a predictable function when it comes to people used to considering their mass-media system as unreliable and politically biased. A common idea, therefore, is that social media, *unlike* news media, can provide people with an arena for public debate: “in social media there is freedom, freedom we don’t have in Arab countries, political, of opinion, of speech, a possibility for expressing your own opinion” (Mohammad, 27, Jounieh). Within digital channels, in any case, people make different choices: some prioritize qualified over amateur sources, as in the case of the Al Jazeera and Al-Arabiya Twitter accounts, allowing users to “follow both sides of the situation in Syria” (Israa, 28, Zarqa). According to others, on the contrary, “Facebook is better than Twitter for gathering news” (Fadia, 19, Zarqa), because “people in Syria use

Facebook to discuss political issues and their condition, and it is a more serious social site than Instagram” (Haya, 23, Amman), and “things written by people you know can give you better information about the events and what happens” (Ali, 25, Beirut). The alleged credibility of Facebook therefore seems to rely on the horizontal structure of the platform itself, or rather on the quality of a specific source. This doubt appears very frequently, even within the same point of view:

Usually my information about what happens Syria don't come from social networks [SN], and I prefer normal phone calls in the normal mobile Turkish line, with acquaintances or friends. In less than 10% of cases my information come from there, because I think the information coming directly from the people you know are more reliable than what it is possible to find in SN. [...] I don't trust the information in social media, unless they are from sources you already know, you know they are reliable, for instance experts, or people they are known for their capacities. I prefer sources with an external credibility, beyond SN, rather in social media they are many people that take advantage of this for getting a popularity” (Zakimohammad, 20, Kilis).

On the other hand, Suheil (21, Istanbul) states that social networks are “the main tool for getting news” about war events—“actually pretty rare”—in his area of Damascus: “sometimes I got information faster through social media than my personal contacts.” In this case, spontaneous Facebook groups play a part by acting at an intermediate level between the *professional* news network of media company accounts and the *private* one of inter-personal communication. In this sense, Facebook communities emerge as a result of spontaneous activity, while also gaining credibility as information services in a time of crisis:

In Dar'a in these days situation is difficult, there is an attack of Syrian regime and Russian forces and SN allow us to know exactly what happens, also because it is hard to maintain direct contacts with people living there; but for any small country, for any village, there is a page with information. And it is with this page that we know how many bombings there are, who is dead, who is alive, which houses have been destroyed, who is forced to leave the house and escape (Tamara, 27, Gaziantep).

Sometimes I follow information on Facebook and Twitter but I try only to follow the important ones, not the detailed, because after years I feel that for my psychological equilibrium it is more useful not to be exposed to too much violence, unless it is really necessary. I know many people rather follow in any detail the events in their zone, city, neighborhood, for instance there is a page explaining what happens in Damascus, which is called “mortar round.” They tell what happens, any explosion, hence it is for sure an instrument from this point of view, but it is an instrument I prefer not to use, to preserve myself as a person (Lilas, 33, Istanbul).

Lack of information, disinformation, and misinformation are usually included among the typical problems of refugees

(Dekker et al., 2016); even so, it seems that even *correct* information, in its turn, may become a problem:

In SN clearly it is possible to observe what happens in your neighborhood and maybe sometimes it is better not to know, I saw that my home was destroyed during a bombing, like my grandparents' house. It a common experience many have lived, and it is really difficult to look from this distance what is going on in your country and you can not do anything. Moreover, you have to understand that people living abroad observe what happens in the country, they see destruction, they see the dead ones, etcetera, and with this dead and this destruction you lose also the hope, your dreams (Mushin Hussein, 20, Kilis).

What Tamara, Lilas, and Mushin Hussein reveal is the dark side of digital communication, where direct access to war information bypasses the gatekeeping function of traditional media, giving shape to an unstable environment. With this respect, mass-self communication is no longer a powerful tool for people's self-organization (Castells, 2012), while also becoming a threat to social equilibrium—and the more so in crisis areas.

Missing Ties

A second motivation for the use of social media is to reconnect with lost friends after entering the diaspora. In this sense, new platforms offer “people an ideal opportunity for rejoining friends and relatives,” as Mohammed (26, Al Jerash) told us about his 200 Facebook friends, almost all of whom he met in person in pre-war Syria. Social media provide an opportunity, according to another interviewed, for “talking again to people I didn't speak with for many years, before the beginning of the war” (Ahlam, 26, Kilis). To some extent, this is a consistent version, under particular circumstances, of what we know as a “dormant tie”—the possibility, opened up by social media, of getting back in touch with lost friends, after a separation due to relocation, change of job (Hampton et al., 2011), or, in this case, forced immigration. While all interviewed used social networks to reconnect with people they had not contacted for a long time, the results of the interviews also made some distinctions necessary.

A first consideration must be dedicated to the specific Syrian regions immigrants are getting in touch with, especially because internet access varies from one part of the country to another. On one hand, low-cost smartphones are easy to get, and iPhone clones usually cost around 25 British pounds. On the other hand, access to the internet is discontinuous, and data about the diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) do not help, as they range from 30% of people on the web (We Are Social, 2018) to 47% of population on Facebook (Global Stats, 2019). With a few exceptions, like the Douma region, 24/7 connection is not available, and in many areas—such as those controlled by Kurdish and governorates ruled by Assad forces—the web is subject to censorship, which also results

in frequent interruptions of service. In the end, the use of social media during political protests seems not to have improved the overall condition of the system: things are rather “getting worse,” when it comes to net neutrality and freedom of speech (Haupt & Camber, 2015). In many areas of the country, internet connection is quite expensive, so that many people limit its use to emergencies; the quality of the signal, in its turn, varies significantly among different locations, and the price of the connection varies from 1,000 to 2,500 SYP per gigabyte from village to village (UK Aid, 2017, p. 19).

The possibility of getting back in touch with lost friends, as we stated, also depends on the state of the infrastructure. A second distinction must be made, then, between people migrating alone and people migrating together with one or more relatives. Fadia (19, Damascus) is a sort of limit-case: she migrated with her extended family to Saudi Arabia and then to Jordan, so that 6 years after, as simple as that, “I have nobody to call.” A third and more relevant issue has to do with competencies in the use of ICTs, and namely with the difference between people who used to access social media in Syria, and those who discovered social media after exile. In the first case, we find highly skilled and highly motivated users, particularly given that Facebook was banned by the Syrian regime and—as confirmed by all interview subjects—the use of a virtual private network (VPN) proxy was required.

In all likelihood, these are high-level users, also considering that in 2014, only 26% of Syrians were connected to the web (Steckman & Andrews, 2017, p. 289). Highly educated users, as usual, came to develop advanced strategies and showed a variety of uses of the web, as the cases of Farida and Ahmad confirm (despite the differences between them):

After Facebook, I started using other social to talk with people in Egypt or Saudi Arabia. Facebook, Instagram, video-calls on Facebook or IMO, with people in different countries. I was very young and therefore I did not use my real age, otherwise nobody would talk to me, I said I was twenty (Farida, 20, Zarqa).

I did not use only Facebook, I learned different services. I liked to know new people and look for information, so I had different profiles. Very often I had to close them, quit and open again, because they closed my accounts. The fact is, I have a very common name, and Ahmad Mohammad is also the name of a criminal, a famous criminal, I even got arrested for this homonymy. Also on social media I learned that every Ahmad is a terrorist (Ahmad, 25, Zarqa).

Farida and Ahmad are highly skilled users, in any evidence: they are part of the “tech-savvy” youth able to manage digital media for specific purposes, as it was the elite spreading news during the so-called Arab Spring uprisings (Khamis et al., 2012, p. 3). Most interviewed subjects, on the other hand, discovered social media only after immigration, and the separation brought by the war made necessary the

adoption of social media. “In Turkey we don’t have problems with electricity and signal, so I can access the Internet whenever I want,” Ahlam (26, Kilis) said, and it is there that Facebook has “become useful to talk with relatives and friends, far friends, friends travelling or living in Germany or in Syria.” By now, “I have so many friends who live far from me, with whom it is difficult to interact,” and “I have a sister still in Syria,” and I call her “mostly with Facebook Messenger,” as another interview subject stated (Mushin, 20 Kilis). They discovered Facebook “after leaving Syria,” others said (Aamir, 29, Beirut), and “in Jordan I saw that many people used it and I started using it to reach people in Syria or people who are now in Europe” (Fatima, 21, Russeifa). The main goal of recovering missing contacts has arguably helped the diffusion of Facebook in Syria, at least in less militarized areas, as social media constitute an excellent platform for emergency situations.

As to the people we interviewed, we observed a clear difference between people who used Facebook in Syria and people who discovered social media after the diaspora. In the first case, we found curious and skilled youth, likely to choose different platforms and services for each specific task. In the second case, we have people limiting themselves to a generic use of Facebook, with the main purpose of maintaining social ties—the very same purpose that led them to the discover of the platform. To some extent, it is the same distinction provided by Maria Bakardjieva (2005, p. 106) between the “indifferently instrumental use”—where users only invest in people they are in touch with, with no attention for the technical tool—and the “curiously instrumental use,” in which socialization is one elements of the exploration of all the potentialities of the net, giving place to a more complex division of labor among different platforms.

Although the use of Facebook is widespread, some people stated that they preferred different platforms. WhatsApp, in particular, was considered “a better channel for personal relationships” (Ala’a, 26, Amman) and more suitable for “private communication” (Youssuf, 33, Amman), or “close relationships” (Adham, 19, Kilis) and “friends and people you really care about, because communication is more private” (Salwa, 21, Beirut). Other people made similar observations about the Imo application, which is “very popular among young Syrians” (Mohammed, 19, Zarqa) or even “the one I use for my real friends” (Fahad, 21, Beirut). In any case, a practical reason can easily explain the prevailing use of Facebook for reconnecting to one’s social world: the state of communication infrastructure in Syria, making calling difficult and added to this difficulty is that of retrieving the phone numbers of relatives and friends. “Phone numbers have changed, then we use Facebook, because it’s more stable” (Haya, 23, Amman); “if you don’t have numbers you can’t use WhatsApp, then it is easier with Facebook and Messenger” (Mohammed, 26, Al Jerash); in other words, “Facebook doesn’t show the number, this is problem, you

have to continue using Facebook” (Ali, 25, Beirut). Concerning the technical problems of WhatsApp, though, some had different doubts: “in some Syrian areas WhatsApp is blocked on the phone, you can’t call but only messages, I don’t know if that’s because of companies or it’s a political thing” (Mohammad, 22, Zarqa); WhatsApp “is ok for places where there is a free connection, but otherwise you use Facebook” to avoid complications (Mohammad, 27, Jounieh). The second main function of social media—reconnecting with missing friends—is therefore mostly guaranteed by Facebook, as shown by the clearest example:

I have my aunt who still lives in Damascus, for a long period we weren’t able to contact her, phone lines were very weak and for the earth lines unfortunately they are under control, you are not free to use. So we asked some neighbors on Facebook, to go to her, open an account for her and explain how to use it, so we could get back in contact (Lilas, 33, Istanbul).

Not surprisingly, people living in the Azraq refugee camp provided different answers: here the “connection is very slow” and therefore “it is difficult to use Facebook,” and “we have to use WhatsApp, when it works” (Ibrahim, 24, Azraq); this was a familiar condition, as Rida (42, Azraq) stated, given that in Syria “I used Skype because it consumes a few traffic units, but Facebook consumes many units.” A very similar, critical situation is shown by the interview subjects living in spontaneous settlements in Douris, in the Lebanese Bekaa Valley; these were four people, aged 20 to 25 years, living in precarious conditions in informal camps close to border cities. Such conditions came as a consequence of choices by the Lebanese government that adopted an open border policy, without making a place for any hospitality projects, including organized refugee camps (Geha & Talhouk, 2018). What people are concerned about, in this case, are basic problems, starting with the weakness of the internet connection: even if “you can see the signal almost always, and during the night we can use the Internet better” (Ahmed, 23, Douris). As a matter of fact, the connection to electrical networks is less problematic than other issues—less problematic, for sure, than the supply of potable water, which is “our worst problem since we are here” (Nabeel, 20, Douris). Because Douris is only a few miles away from the Syrian border, a further issue has to do with the discontinuous phone signal coverage, leading people—as happens in the Zaatari camp, which is also very close to the border (Wall et al., 2015 pp. 6–7)—to an alternate use of Syrian and local SIM cards. Syrian SIM cards are used because they allow “very cheap calls” (Ahmed, 23, Douris), while local SIMs are used to avoid Syrian political surveillance. In any case, this is a very particular situation, in which the precariousness of information is only one aspect—and not even the most relevant—of a broader state of deprivation.

Looking Forward: Resettlement in a New Country

The use of social media for resettlement has to do with three main practices: the search for information necessary to organize travel; help for organizing daily life in the new country; and finally, the more ambitious goal of building a new sense of community. Unlike other studies, in any case, our interviews revealed only a very little use of social media for the first purpose, travel preparation. In all cases, however, this was due to the fact that the interviewed people actually moved to border countries—Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan—thus facing a less difficult journey than women and men heading Europe or migrants marching across Sahara, for which Collyer (2007) invented the definition of the “do-it-yourself migrant”:

The use of Facebook didn’t help during the trip. I am from A’zaz, which is a border city, 40 kilometers from Kilis, therefore I had no problems to have all information I needed (Mushin, 20, Kilis).

We were pretty close to the border, so we didn’t need social network for know which route to follow, how to cross the border. When we arrived in Jordan we had news about Jordan and Syria on Facebook, Facebook represented 90% of the information. When we left the country, Facebook was blocked, and this is one of the reasons we were afraid, worried (Tamara, 27, Gaziantep).

There were already these relatives we have here in Jordan, we didn’t need to look for too much information. The travel is easy, there was no reason to use many services, we were in touch with the people who are hosting us (Israa, 28, Zarqa).

To come to Lebanon, the travel wasn’t to organize, there was no need to look for information on Facebook, we knew how to come. We only used social media when we arrived here, because we needed information about documents and many things (Manaar, 21, Beirut).

Social networks proved to be useful, for organizing everyday life in the host countries, however, including for activities such as searching for a home, documenting local laws and bureaucracy, learning a new language, and finding a job. The case of a woman who escaped from Dar’a to Turkey is telling:

I sell half-cooked food, then people finish too cook at home, and this mostly on Facebook, most of the requests come from Facebook. Initially I started asking friends and neighbors, if they wanted something, but I then widen with social networks, because I don’t have many friends here in Turkey. The social network has been a good instrument for commercializing my products. I work because I have Facebook. I have the passion for cooking, and my neighbors told me I am good, and I used to tell them I wanted to start selling food, and they encouraged me. I started in the first day of Ramadan, because they told me “look,

in this period they all want *kibbeh* or *barak*,” which are Syrian dishes, sort of meatballs and sort of stuffed pancakes, then I started make it, a quantity, I decided the precise and this attracted some clients. I used the group of Syrian women in Gaziantep, there are three or four with some thousands of people, consider that usually they are women, they order the products. The most part of my clients, 90%, are people I didn’t not before. 90% they come from Facebook pages (Tamara, 27, Gaziantep).

Other interviews provided similar results: some interview subjects used Facebook groups to apply to study pharmacology at university (Fatima, 21, Russeifa), for being known as an Arabic teacher for Western people (Farida, 20, Zarqa), or, in turn, for selling typical Syrian dishes to acquaintances and friends of friends (Amal, 27, Jounieh). We have to notice that, in most cases, the network of Facebook friends was grounded in a very limited physical area, and often in a specific neighborhood. This fact actually seems to both confirm the tendency of digital networks to embed off-line contacts (Hampton & Wellman, 2003, pp. 277–304), and the tendency of immigrants to integrate in a small community, rather than in the host country as a whole (Mulvey, 2013). Another example:

I was used to make different jobs, in the houses, I know how to fix, I can fix things, or deliveries, this type of services. When I arrived, I had to start, at the beginning I start with people in the neighborhood, but then I saw that it worked on Facebook, and I can find people who need something I can do (Ali, 25, Beirut).

Facebook does provide a service to fulfill these needs, by gathering people together—both the demand and the supply—in the same platform. More precisely, many interviewed people declared the use of Facebook groups for Syrian immigrants and refugees, and it is here—when it comes to the more ambitious level of resettlement, the building of a new community—that complications begin:

Social networks, it’s a shame, they are not a good instrument for knowing Turkish, Turkish people where I live, also because of the Turkish language, but the only Turkish I know are people I meet in person, not on the social network (Lilas, 33, Istanbul).

I have 450 friends on Facebook. I think five are born in Jordan. The others are Syrians, after seven years you stay on Facebook, didn’t give many possibilities to meet people from the country where I live (Afef, 24, Amman).

Social network did not help, didn’t help much the merging between Turkish and Syrians, and there is a part of Turkish they don’t interact with Syrians and another they don’t accept their presence, and also on Facebook. This is awful, because the presence of Syrian in South of Turkey has been also a big economic development, just you see factories where there are many Syrian workers, with a low salary (Ghada, 36, Gaziantep).

I use mostly Facebook and WhatsApp, I stay in touch with relatives and friends, the close friends. I use also Facebook to talk with relatives and friends who live far, some of them are travelling, ore in German, or in Syria, or people here in Kilis, they are almost all Syrians (Ahlam, 26, Kilis).

Other young respondents revealed a similar condition. Mushin (20, Kilis), for instance, has “many friends, they are by now far for me, it would be difficult without Facebook” and has a sister still in Syria, “and I am in contact with Syrians, basically.” Ali (25, Zarqa) divides his online time between his “friends in Syria and Syrian friends living abroad, also in other countries.” Mohammed (26, Al Jerash) uses Facebook mostly for compatriots living in “Sweden, Germany and Canada,” and WhatsApp for friends and relatives in Jordan—in any case, uses social media mostly to stay in touch with Syrians. Facebook actually seems to provide people with a diasporic community by connecting Syrians with each other. This is definitely a positive function when one considers that Syrians are going through a delicate healing process after the civil war and they are affected by a traditional identity problem in the form of the lack of a properly shaped sense of “Syrianity” (Ramírez Díaz, 2016, pp. 85–86). On the other hand, though, the high frequency of relationships among Syrians seem to confirm—in an extreme situation—a well-known problem, that affects social behavior and online socialization: *homophily*, which leads people to mostly stay in touch with people who are like-minded or similar (McPherson et al., 2001).

The integration of immigrants in the host country, it has been observed, requires a complex process to be able to make them both perceptible and not perceptible, or (*im*)*perceptible*—that is, no longer perceptible as stigmatized groups and able to emerge in terms of individual characteristics (Witteborn, 2015). Nonetheless, the balkanization of the web—by which refugees cluster around homogeneous, diaspora communities—can slow down, if not jeopardize the integration process. The dimension of the problem is revealed in all three countries considered in this study through the use of Syrian Facebook groups for the purpose of finding a partner. This practice does not help the goal of merging between ethnic groups, as has already been observed in some migrant communities, such as Somalis living in France (Charmarkeh, 2013, p. 48). Similar evidence comes from an analysis of the effect of Facebook on social capital, in this case realized on Syrians living in Syria by Reem Ramadam (2018). Through quantitative content analysis of more than 900 Facebook profiles, followed by 15 in-depth interviews, Ramadan noticed how Facebook actually helped to rebuild a sense of mutual *truth* after the crisis opened by the war (Social Watch, 2017)—in this way, confirming Francis Fukuyama’s (1999) thesis on the virtuous relationship between solidarity and digital media, which lies at the heart of Barry Wellman’s theory about the nature of social media (Hampton & Wellman, 2003; Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

In our case, a similar tendency is shown by the use of support groups for people coming from specific Syrian regions, rather than from Syria: “there are Facebook groups for Aleppo, and other groups possibly for people from Homs,” as we heard from an interview subject in Turkey (Lilas, 33, Istanbul). A similar indication comes from the cited research on the Syrian community in Italy, which shows that the reinforcement of shared values comes at the price of excluding dissonant opinions, especially the exclusion of pro-Assad opinions from virtual communities of Syrians abroad (Al-Rawi & Fahmy, 2018). More broadly speaking, it seems that our results confirm the tendency of the web toward the process of balkanization, as has been discussed in recent years. To some extent, one can say that our results tell more about the way social media work than they tell about the immigration process per se. If homophily appears to be a clear characteristic of the Syrian digital community, it is hard to draw any conclusion about Syrian integration, in part, because the analysis of the integration process is basically unilateral because it considers refugees as people who have to absorb new values, with a little consideration for the cultural diversity migrants bring with them (De Lomba, 2010).

Discussion

The Syrian case has been widely analyzed for both the impressive dimensions of diaspora and the recognized role of digital media in the uprisings and civil war (Ahmad & Hamasaeed, 2015; Lynch et al., 2014; Rohde et al., 2016). Our fieldwork was limited to a few cases, as happens in qualitative research, but it confirms some critical points that have already emerged in the scientific literature. Contradictions and limits have emerged that make far from linear the relationship between the adoption of social media and the definition of a new sense of belonging or, as we used to say some years ago, of a diasporic community.

We took into account three main uses of social media: the search for information and news about Syria; the search for missing ties; and resettlement practices. In all cases, we observed some contradictory practices that show how complicated the integration process is. As Castles et al. (2002, p. 114) state, complex societies are not “mono-cultural” while they are “marked by differences in culture, religion, class and social behavior,” and these differences—among both natives and refugees—can eventually affect the same meaning of *integration*. This led to the three main complications we observed, one for each analytical level. Concerning the first function of social media, the problem has to do with the classical overload condition—that is, the enormous amount of content, the spread of fake news, the difficulty of telling the true apart from the false and the recourse to a fiduciary social network as a frequent answer to such uncertainty.

As to the second use, the search for missing ties, the main issue is rather technical, due to the destruction of Syrian

infrastructure and the splitting of its territory into an archipelago of connected and disconnected zones and more and less expensive price areas that are, moreover, subjected to the surveillance of different political authorities. When it comes to the third practice, the use of social media to build a new community in the host country, we found a social problem, namely, the tendency of Web 2.0 to define closed clusters rather than open groups. We believe that the last indication is the most relevant one, as it shows how digital connectivity—besides the technical limitations we have considered—is not able per se to favor integration and inter-ethnic dialog, and also gives place to a different, if not opposed social configuration.

Overall, as we have stated, our findings confirm the results of previous analyses, with a new emphasis on a specific issue—again, the balkanization of the web. In all likelihood, this is due to the fact that existing surveys are not based on media theories and are therefore missing the opportunity to detect this problem. There is a rather thin difference with the most complete research available, the project *Mapping Refugees*, which deals with different levels in the media ecosystem: interviews with immigrants and operators, analysis of Facebook groups, media coverage, and so on (Gillespie et al., 2016). In fact, this research does show similar issues—misinformation and disinformation, digital surveillance, and so on—as it draws on theoretical definitions of media. On the other hand, the research does not take into account the balkanization process, it is based on the affordances of the smartphone for multiple activities (Gillespie et al., 2018, p. 7), rather than on the affordances of social media, which give shape to walled gardens and homogeneous communities.

There are basically two main limitations to our work. The first has to do with the protocol of qualitative sociology as such that allows for very little generalization about the macrosocial context. In this sense, the life stories we collected can hopefully provide some insights into the deep relationship between the migration experience and the affordances of social media, without making possible any broader considerations. Second, one may wonder to what extent the interviews are *biased* toward a Western interpretation of properties and effects related to social media. In this sense, the use of bottom-up stories, which are able to balance the top-down vision of media scholars, is only a first step with respect to the main goal of “decentering” the European view in migration studies (Leurs & Smets, 2018), or, even more broadly speaking, “de-Westernizing” media studies as a whole (see Park & Curran, 2000). When one considers the relevance of immigration-related issues in public debate, this issue deserves greater attention in the future.

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