

University of Tampere  
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# **“Smartphone refugees”**

**Mobility, power regimes, and the impact of digital technologies**

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SILKE JUNGBLUTH – “Smartphone refugees”: mobility, power regimes, and the impact of digital technologies

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is an exploration into the role of new digital technologies for the mobile practices of forcefully displaced people. Based on data retrieved from qualitative interviews with Iraqi asylum seekers in Finland, as well as online observation of interactions on Facebook groups, it maps out how their use of mobile digital technology and media – in this work subsumed under the term ICT (information and communication technologies) – is embedded in unequal relations of power that frame, control, and contain their mobility as “illegal” or “irregular”.

This study shows that ICT, particularly smartphones and social media, occupy an ambiguous role for the mobile practices of their users in the context of forced displacement. ICT enable the decentralization of information flows and the expansion of personal network connections. Technological devices can also be used to challenge imaginations of “refugeeness” by being employed as performative artifacts.

However, the role of ICT is still mainly determined by underlying grids of unequal power distribution, which marginalize and contain the mobile practices of groups of people and provide points of leverage to legal, political, and discursive regimes of mobility. The merging of virtual and physical trajectories through ICT allows those interested in containing certain forms of mobility to extrapolate the users’ physical location and movement from their online activities, thus creating dangers of surveillance and control. Control over physical space is further becoming increasingly congruent with control over connectivity, due to the importance of immobile structures (such as cellular networks) for the functionality of ICT. Furthermore, access to ICT as a mobility resource is unequally distributed along lines of economic and social assets, as well as the skills to operate successfully within digital information landscapes. Therefore, this thesis argues that ICT in the context of forceful displacement need to be seen as embedded in grids of power setting the limits to the interconnected mobilities of people, objects, and information.

**Key words:** *mobility, ICT, mobile technology, refugees, border regimes, Iraq, Finland*

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# 1. Introduction

This thesis is an exploration into the role of new digital technologies for the mobility of forcefully displaced people. Based on qualitative interviews with Iraqi asylum seekers in Finland, as well as online observation of interactions on Facebook groups, I have studied how the use of relatively recently developed mobile digital technology and media – in this work subsumed under the term ICT (information and communication technologies) – impacts on the mobile practices of a certain group of mobile people, whose movement is framed as “illegal” and “irregular” by legal and discursive regimes, and whose experience of mobility is coined by forced displacement and persecution. It is with reference to this experience of mobility as well as the self-ascription of the participants of this study that I use the word “refugee” in this thesis, as will be discussed further in the upcoming chapter.

The increased movement of forcefully displaced people across the inner and outer borders of the European Union in recent years has provided fuel for heated discussion. More than 1.2 million non-EU citizens applied for asylum in a member state in 2015 alone, nearly twice as many as in the previous year (eurostat, 2016). Media outlets and political spokespeople were quick to declare a “European refugee crisis” of unprecedented dimensions, questioning European capacities to contain and handle this influx of people, as well as the legitimacy of such “illegal immigrants” seeking protection in the EU (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016). Asylum and border politics have become a hot topic in national elections, and hardly a day goes by without extensive media coverage of the subject (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, & Moore, 2015).

There seems to be an at times downright surprised attitude in public discourse regarding the magnitude of the mobility of refugees, but also with regard to who these mobile actors are. An almost symptomatic example for how “the contemporary refugee” in Europe is framed is the discussion about why “refugees” – supposedly seeking protection and a better life in Europe – own what is perceived to be “luxury goods”, such as smartphones (O’Malley, 2015). Indeed, the question of “why refugees own smartphones” (Habekuß & Schmitt, 2015; O’Malley, 2015; Rosenblum, 2016) has been discussed at length in news articles, comment sections, and on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, usually in response to voices aiming at “morally delineating the deserving refugee from the undeserving migrant” (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016, p.13).

Such media responses have – rather enthusiastically – described smartphones in particular and digital technology as such as a “lifeline for refugees” (Herships, 2015). Smartphones are crucial for the safety

of refugees on the road, they argue, as they are used for real-time communication with friends and family members all over the world, for navigation with the help of GPS, for accessing the internet, for information exchange on Facebook groups and messenger services, and for the documentation of personal experiences (Worley, 2016) – or, as Witty (2015) termed it, “digital scrapbooking”.

Indeed, when entering the subject, I encountered a rather enthusiastic attitude not only in the majority of media outlets, but also particularly on the part of the humanitarian aid sector. From 2014 onwards, volunteers and aid organizations, government institutions, as well as a growing branch of start-ups primarily in the mobile software area, have been extensively developing and providing countless online services specifically targeted at forcibly displaced people. Numerous Facebook groups and phone applications<sup>1</sup> have been designed in recent years to provide specific vital information to refugees throughout their entire journeys, from planning to leave their home country, to finding human traffickers on the way, and to applying for jobs and learning the language of their country of arrival. Ram (2016) termed this development the increased “appification of immigration”. Initiatives such as “Techfugees”, a “social enterprise coordinating the international tech community response to the needs of refugees” (Butcher, 2016), where activists from different technology branches coordinate their efforts to provide technology-driven solutions for the global refugee crisis, gained increased attention. Even the United Nations Refugee Agency UNHCR launched a “Connectivity for Refugees” project in mid-2016 that emphasizes the need for mobile connectivity as a resource for displaced people (Vernon, Deriche, & Eisenhauer, 2016). It seems as if the increased involvement of digital technology in the mobility patterns of displaced people is more and more considered as a focal action point for contributing to their well-being. “Humanitarian innovation” has become a popular buzzword to address social problems on a technological level (Betts, Bloom, & Weaver, 2015), and scholars such as Witteborn (2015) argue that mobile technologies

can be seen as central political action tools, which create evolving forms of collective mobilization that challenge concepts of border through information sharing, transnational grouping and political learning. (p.15)

<sup>1</sup> An extensive, but by no means exhaustive list of apps – sortable by function and region - can for example be found at [www.appsforrefugees.com](http://www.appsforrefugees.com).

An online commentator even proclaimed: “it is funny that the little smartphone is what will finally bring down international borders” (MNA1, 2016).

However, as it quickly turned out in my conversations with asylum seekers in Finland, the role of mobile technologies and digital media was much more ambiguous than it would seem. As I show in this thesis, my interview partners’ experience with digital technology and media was rather Janus-faced: while being indispensable aids on their journey from Iraq to Europe, mobile technologies were also a tremendous source of precarity for them (see also Wall, Campbell and Janbek, 2015). State surveillance, misleading information, the reliance on anonymous sources on social media, and not least the very fact of forced displacement itself shaped their experience of using technology “as refugees”. It became thus clear very soon that I could not talk about the role of ICT for the mobility of “refugees” without understanding the processes that framed and controlled this mobility. The way my interlocutors experienced their mobility as refugees was embedded in the context of regimes aiming to contain, regulate, and impose meaning on the way they moved.

Therefore, in this thesis, I aim to go beyond the question of “why refugees own smartphones” and, instead, explore the following set of questions: what role does the involvement of ICT play for the mobility of forcefully displaced people? How are these technologies embedded in local (political, socio-legal, territorial, and discursive) regimes framing and controlling “refugee mobility”, and how is their use restricted by the “politics of mobility” (Cresswell, 2010a) maintaining those regimes? Can technologies help circumvent or transform such restrictions, or do they reinforce the limits of mobility for certain mobile actors?

In this sense, I would like to thank my interview partners for sharing their time and stories with me. This thesis could not have been written without their insights and suggestions, which significantly shaped the focus and design of the research. Thus, even though I will refer to them in this thesis as “my interlocutors” or “my interview partners”, I want to emphasize that their contributions to this research went far beyond providing answers to interview questions.

## **2. Framing refugee mobility**

In this chapter, I will dive further into the theoretical premises of this thesis by critically discussing “refugees” as a socio-legal as well as analytical category. I argue that notions of “refugeeness” and “refugee mobility” are embedded in “mobility regimes” consisting of policy regulations, (legal) terminology, as well as social, political, and academic discourse, which control the unequal distribution of mobility resources and thus have the potential to regulate the mobility of people. I further argue that those regimes follow the impetus of methodological nationalism by assuming a “national order of things” (Malkki, 1995) as the natural order of the world, in which “sedentarist” confinement to national borders is seen as the norm. Space and human movement within space thus become politically loaded. In the second part of this chapter, I elaborate on the implications of methodological nationalism for academic research on refugees and explain how the use of this term is to be understood in the context of this thesis.

### **2.1 Regimes of mobility and methodological nationalism**

When talking about “refugees”, it should be kept in mind that the framing of what constitutes a “refugee” always follows particular agendas, many of which are based on the objective of defining, containing, and controlling the movement of people, and is thus political (Zetter, 1991). Human mobility is constantly framed and re-framed, with mobile people being sorted into different “categories of mobility”. In visa and passport regimes, policy regulations, and legal definitions, but also in scientific work, distinctions are drawn between the mobility of “refugees”, “migrant workers”, “tourists”, “cosmopolitan travelers”, “illegals”, or in a more territorial sense between “internal” and “external” migration, “transnational” and “cross-border” movement. As I shall show in this chapter, these categorizations are often based on a sedentarist understanding of the “modern” world order along naturalized lines of nation states, thus following a methodological nationalism, which is characterized by political power structures. The identification of these structures as well as their impact on creating mobility for some, while preventing others to be mobile, is one of the main aims of this thesis.

To begin with, to understand the impact of the nationalist world view expressed in political regulations of human mobility, it is essential to conceptualize mobility as practice. Cresswell (2010a) argues that mobility cannot be understood solely as the physical and spatial movement between two or more locations, but rather as “the entanglement of movement, representation, and

practice” (p.19), where each of those three components is governed by politics of mobility. Physical movement of objects and people is contextualized and influenced by representations of mobility in positive and negative contexts, for example by media and policy narratives of a “refugee flood” in Europe, or by categorizing migrants as “legal” and “illegal”. Representations and narratives of mobility shape the context in which physical movement is perceived and understood, also with regard to the space in which the movement (literally) takes place. At the same time, practices of mobility conceived as “the social that is embodied and habitualised” (Cresswell, 2010a, p.20) are strongly linked both to the representational and the spatial aspect of mobility, because both the actual physical act and the experience of movement (shaped by contextualizing representations) are negotiated through the body. Different entanglements of those three components produce “constellations of mobility” which represent historical narratives about movement, regulated by politics of mobility (Cresswell, 2010a, p.26-28). Understanding mobility as practice-driven thus underlines its “transformative power” (Ernste, Martens, & Schapendonk, 2012, p.509).

The framing of “refugeeness” is one of the prime examples of the regulation of movement by politics of mobility. As Malkki (1995) has shown, the categorization of migrants in general and “refugees” in particular is usually based on a sedentarist representation of human mobility that treats (spatial) stability structured along national borders as the “norm” of society, against which the mobility of refugees stands out as a disturbance of that norm. Methodological nationalism, the assumption that territorially bound nations or states (conflating to the idea of nation-states) are natural entities determining the modern world order, influences policy strategies and legal categorizations regarding human movement. It creates a frame in which “immigrants must appear as antinomies to an orderly working of state and society” (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002, p.309), because they challenge the “isomorphism between citizenry, sovereign, solidarity group and nation” implied in the nationalist project. The cross-border movement of people thus compromises the “national mythscape” (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013, p.194) on which modern states are built. Following methodological nationalism, territorial borders serve as the demarcation of the nation and its people as a sovereign entity, a solidarity group, and an ethnic community with citizenship as a notch, to which migrants as “trespassers” from the foreign outside provide an anomaly and threat. Amoore, Marmura and Salter (2008) describe this as a process of increasing “automated governance”, in which “the border becomes a crucial site of surveillance, where identities, mobilities, and narratives are examined by agents of the state” (p.97).

As a consequence, mobility of people can only be understood with regard to the political dimension of “modern” nation state building, expressed in the legal and discursive frameworks that categorize



and deal with those being mobile. Those “regimes of mobility” (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013) comprise not only of state actors, but also other mechanisms rooted in for example media discourse and international regulations aimed at normalizing different types of mobility, while at the same time delegitimizing and illegalizing others (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013, p.189). Depending on those dichotomous categorizations, mobility and immobility become two sides of the same coin:

[E]ach historic restructuring of modes and spaces of accumulation creates new and dynamic relationships between mobility and immobility that empower the few and create conditions of spatialised but connected contestation among the many. (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013, p.190)

National asylum policies provide countless examples for this kind of unequally distributed power of access to (legal) mobility that is structured along the supposed national order of things. The “fetish of national territory” (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002, p.309) is shown not only in the unequal assignment of power to the state to determine whether a person's mobility across and outside the borders of their “homeland” is considered legal and thus legitimate, but also in the way such determination is undertaken with the national affiliation of a certain individual or group as a major criterion (institutionalized for example through passport and visa regimes). This becomes apparent for instance in lists of “safe states”, a concept that serves as a scheme to dichotomize asylum seeker's claims for protection as legitimate and illegitimate according to their nationality in individual countries. The agenda informing such policy regulations becomes visible in the contingency with which assessments regarding the “safety” of certain countries change as a response to the mobility of certain groups of people. In Finland, for instance, humanitarian protection is no longer granted to asylum seekers from Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia since May 2016 as a result of changes in the Aliens Act and an “updated” assessment of the allegedly improved security situation in those respective countries (Maahanmuuttovirasto, 2016). However, the changes in legislation themselves are a consequence of the increased influx of asylum seekers from those countries in 2014-2016, showing that the categorization of mobile people is an immediate attempt to illegitimize their movement, illegalize their infringement of national borders, and thus contain and regulate their mobility.

Similarly, Mountz, Coddington, Catania, and Loyd (2013) have shown that the detention and deportation of “illegal” immigrants are acts of assuming control over the mobile body of the

migrant following the stencil of national borders. They argue that the detention of migrants is embedded in a paradoxical system of self-sustainment, in which the migrant as a “non-citizen” - the “other” and “unknown” – is seen as a danger that needs to be contained. This criminalization of the migrant “invokes a circular rationale that legitimizes detention: migrants *might* be criminals, necessitating detention; migrants *must* be criminals, because they are detained” (Mountz et al., 2013, p.527). Thus, the assumed and inscribed illegality of a certain category of mobile people is the driving factor in producing this very illegality. In this system, deportations to the “countries of origin” are then the “ultimate confirmation of national identity” (p.527).

Such legal regimes of mobility are, however, not strictly limited to the national realm. As Gabrielli (2014) has argued, migration in the context of the European Union is becoming increasingly entrenched in a framework of securitization and increasing militarization. The Schengen framework “produces a new common 'external border' separating the territories of the signatory countries from the outside and the 'insiders' from the 'outsiders'” (p.312). At the same time, the border itself is shifted increasingly further south by outsourcing responsibilities to “buffer states”, as well as the private security market, so that the distinction between what constitutes internal and external security threats brought about by migratory movements is increasingly blurred. These policies of securitization, in restricting the possibilities for people to cross borders in what would be considered “legal” ways, paradoxically create a self-sustaining system in which practices of containing “illegal” mobility become a lucrative business model not only for security firms, but also smugglers, traffickers, the military apparatus, and even the designated buffer states which often receive favorable treatment or subsidies for their function as the “border guards” of Europe. This “illegality industry” (Andersson, 2014), profiting from the framing of mobility as illegal, while being designed to contain the “threat” of illegal immigration, perpetuates and relies on the framing of the movement of people as such for its own existence and can thus hardly be interested in diminishing it (Mountz et al., 2013). Hence, as Gabrielli (2014) argues, the role of borders is often more a place of power demonstration, a “theatrical spot where European governments develop their representation of state control over immigration processes” (p.316).

Examples like this show how “politics of mobility” as defined by Cresswell (2010a) are regulating the interplay between the spatial movement of people and how the representation of that movement affects the practices of those being mobile. While national mobility regimes frame the mobility of people in socio-legal categories – always on the basis of the migrant as a “turbulence” (Cresswell & Martin, 2012) in the sedentarist world order of co-existing nation states – this very framing at the same time regulates the mobility of people.

Yet, this regulation is not only achieved by the legal implementation of such categories, but also by the lack of them. Mason's (2011) study on the (im)mobility of Iraqi refugees in Jordan illustrates this latter case. Her work reveals how the replacement of a domestic asylum regime with a regime of “pan-Arab hospitality” (p.354) in Jordan disconnects experiences of mobility from its legal and social representation, and by doing so limits the connectivity and the capability of forcibly displaced people to be physically and socially mobile. Rather than being categorized as refugees, Iraqis in Jordan are referred to as temporary “visitors” or “guests”, which provides them with an unclear socio-legal position without particular protection or rights. This, in turn, limits their access to services, protection, and connectivity both across borders and within the country (see also Chatelard, 2010). Thus, their physical, virtual, and social mobility is represented and defined by the socio-economic framework imposed on them by the legal system, which is an attempt to assert “state control over the permeability of borders and the mobility of non-citizens” (Mason, 2011, p.359). Becoming a citizen “requires a high level of socio-economic mobility” (p.359) in the first place, for example to be able to access certain kinds of information, travel within the country to find jobs, connect with the local community and so forth. As a consequence, Iraqi refugees in Jordan quickly find themselves in a vicious circle of inaccessible mobility resources and thus limited mobility practices. The categorization of “visitors” rather than “refugees” furthermore implies a capability to be mobile and “come for a visit” any time, while being also free to leave at any point, which contradicts the actual experience of involuntary displacement and the limited capability to be mobile that this sort of framework itself imposes on the refugees. Recognizing them as refugees would imply a certain mobility “project” on the refugees' side, in which Jordan as a locality or place would represent a stage of (voluntary) immobility, whereas the narrative of “guests” implies at best a transit stage and their intention to eventually go back to Iraq. Thus, the representation of the refugees' in the social and legal system bares a fine line between im/mobilities that are defined by practices of representation, experiences, and (prevented) physical movement, regulated by politics of mobility (Cresswell, 2010a).

Mason's study on the mobility regimes in Jordan also reveals how the creation of “space” along the lines of national borders and perception of the people moving within it is politically loaded (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013). Dzenovska (2013) argues that “practices of mobility are shaped by the material reality of the national order of things and that the national order of things also lends meaning to mobility in collective and individual narratives.” (p.205). The movement of people in and across this space is interpreted and understood in different ways depending on the categorization of those who are mobile. At the same time, these categorizations are often shaped by

essentialist notions of how, where, and why certain kinds of people are moving. Consequently, the categorization of people into certain “mobile groups” such as refugees, work migrants, tourists or in this case “visitors” as the counterpoint to refugees is built on and implies particular assumptions about the mobile patterns of those groups in a politically loaded space. Refugee trajectories in particular tend to be reduced to the physical journey between the “home” and “host” country, while any further mobility within or away from the “host country” (often referred to as “secondary movement”) is considered “irregular” and thus problematic (Scalettaris, 2009). This creates the paradoxical representation of refugee mobility as an irregularity in a sedentarist world, which however follows particular rules of how, when, and where this movement happens.

Schapendonk (2012) illustrates this political pre-definition of refugee trajectories in her research on what is understood to be “transit countries”. She shows that physical mobility is considered to be the norm of refugee trajectories as a violation of the generally assumed sedentarist world order; thus, their own spatial immobility is often understood to be located in a “transit phase” of their mobile trajectories. The idea of “transit migration”, of migrants being “stuck” in an immobile state in certain localities, presupposes an understanding of mobility as a linear movement from point A to point B and implies that migrants have pre-designed, static plans for their journeys. However, such concepts are not only often Eurocentric in nature (as they presuppose general tendencies of movement from the periphery to Europe as the central destination of migrants), but also ignore the changing dynamics of migrants’ trajectories affected by their very practices of movement (Schapendonk, 2012, p.578) and the resulting re-negotiation of the meaning of space. Phases of physical immobility are not necessarily stopping points; they include processes of re-organization and planning, they are negotiation points for past and future trajectories, they provide the opportunity for information exchange with others. As imagined trajectories are interrupted, perceptions of immobility can change – what was formerly perceived as a “transit stage” might become a permanent living situation; it might open up some routes and close down others. As a result, trajectories of migrants and particularly refugees are not static formations between two points in space, but should be understood as a process that is constantly re-shaped, interpreted, and negotiated through practice as people, objects, and information move or come to a (temporary) halt. Similarly, places are created and transformed through practices of mobility that assign and inscribe meaning to them, which makes mobility “an act of power” (Lemos, 2010, p.413). Thus, as I have argued with Cresswell at the beginning of this chapter, mobility should be understood as embodied practice rather than mere spatial movement, because the meaning of the space through which this movement winds is the result of constant negotiations of meaning dominated by mobility regimes -

“space is a vacuum, place is produced” (Lemos, 2010, p.410).

## **2.2 Researching refugees**

Having elaborated on the socio-political framing of the mobility of refugees in particular, it is necessary to remember that those regimes of mobility are not solely limited to the governmental and policy realm. Social science has been a crucial player in propelling the nationalist state-building project by ignoring, naturalizing, or downplaying the influence of methodological nationalism in its own work (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). Indeed, even research that is aimed at critically deconstructing the nationalist paradigm by for instance focusing on “transnational migrant communities” or the cross-border movement of people often contributes to its consolidation instead (cf. Kalir, 2013). Similarly, the confinement of research settings within national borders and an analytical focus on

the relationship between land and people (or place and people) as nationalist leads to a reduction of thick network of relations that are quickly abstracted or fold into national(ist) common sense. (Dzenovska, 2013, p.212)

Research on “refugees” in particular often tends to decontextualize, dehistoricize and depoliticize the “refugee experience” by taking it out of its socio-cultural context and overemphasizing individual personal background and life stories, while ignoring the political and societal framings and reasons for experiences of displacement and flight (Malkki, 1996). In the same vein, legal and political categories such as “refugees” or “work migrants” and the implications of trajectories mentioned before are often taken for granted and uncritically adapted as analytical categories. Underlying power structures of unequal access to mobility resources rooted in global economic networks of capital accumulation often disappear in this process of “naturalizing” legal regimes. What Kalir termed the “aquatic metaphor of flow” (2013, p.314) often used in the context of human mobility research, which is also visible in discourses of “floods” or “waves” of migrants washing over European borders (Mountz et al., 2013, p. 529), dismisses the “underlying grid of power” (Kalir, 2013, p.314) regulating those movements. With regard to this thesis, this is particularly important when looking at the seemingly unrestricted “flow” of information enabled by mobile technology, which – as shall be shown – is equally regulated and bound to structures of unequal

power relations enabling mobility for some, while ostracizing others.

This awareness of methodological nationalism shaping research designs and methodology then also requires a critical dissection of the spatial component of “refugee mobility”. As I have pointed out in the previous sub-chapter, notions of space and movement through that space are politically loaded and often reproduce categories implemented by regimes of mobility that are structured along an imagined national-sedentarist world order. Godin and Doná (2016) rightly point out that research artificially separating the experiences of refugees into “pre-flight, flight, and post-flight” stages “can lead to a homogenized representation of the refugee experience” (p.61) and is thus to be viewed critically. The notion of clearly differentiable stages of trajectories as the “refugee experience” is essentialist and trans-historical, similar to the confinement of the research to peoples' movements between states. In adhering to such notions, academic work often reproduces the regimes of power defining the mobility of people, assisting what Andersson (2014) has termed the “illegality industry” of border regimes that “reduces and flattens its migrant 'product' into this one generic mold of migrant illegality” (p.8).

This is not to say that we should assume an inherent generalizability of “refugees” and “refugee experiences”, but mainly serves as a reminder to reconsider how regimes of refugee representation shape our understanding of what constitutes refugees as an analytical group and “being” a refugee in particular. It is therefore necessary to identify the dynamics of those regimes rather than uncritically adopting definitions and categorizations. As Kynsilehto and Puumala (2015) remind us, we as researchers are involved in processes of framing regimes of representations and definitions, and thus need to develop “an understanding of the vast and diverse networks of power that are involved in the processes of producing both citizens/permanent residents and asylum seekers/refugee populations” (p.449). Research that allegedly “lends” voice to refugees needs to be aware of the reproduction of power relations between the researcher as the one framing the narrative context and the refugees as interview partners, who find themselves limited to this pre-formed context. The researcher frames the context in which the refugees' stories are told, interpreted and analyzed; indeed, “deciding which segments to analyze and putting boundaries around them are interpretive acts that are shaped in major ways by the investigator's theoretical interests” (Riessman, 2001, p.689f), which, in turn, are often shaped by the agendas of mobility regimes naturalized in scientific research.

Taking these points into consideration, I have tried my best throughout this thesis to do justice to potential undertones of methodological nationalism, while at the same time not dismissing its importance in discourse and policy regulations, since they do contribute to the experience of

mobility for my interlocutors. Thus, I am using the terms “refugees” and “asylum seekers” in this thesis because it proves to be relevant for participants of this research in several ways. My interview partners refer to themselves as “refugees” or at times “asylum seekers”, while most of them used those terms synonymously during the interviews. For them, the refugee terminology demonstrates the legitimacy of their claims for protection and frames their cross-border movement, but also characterizes the experience of their own mobility as a “flight” from dangers that are – as I will show later – not necessarily territorially defined to their country of origin. It is also a common term to identify one another, not least online, for example by searching for and joining groups particularly targeted at “refugees”. Thus, the refugee-terminology in this thesis is not to be understood as strictly coherent with any legal categorization of assigned protection statuses, but rather refers to people whose experience of mobility is characterized by forceful displacement. As I shall explain later, this experience of displacement of my interlocutors is not necessarily limited to their cross-border movement or the “journey” from Iraq to Finland, but in some cases also comprises spatial mobility within national borders (see chapter 5). Thus, the distinctions between “internally” and “externally” displaced people can be rather fluid and for this reason not reflected as binary categories in this thesis, as I argue that refugees' experience of mobility can comprise of both.



### **3. Mobility and technology**

After having positioned this research in the ongoing debate about regimes of mobility, I introduce in the following new digital technologies and media, or information and communication technologies (ICT), as the lens through which I examine the “grid of power” (Kalir, 2013) regulating the movement of people. This chapter starts with a general overview of the debate concerning the role of technological development for the mobility of people, and I argue that the focus on new ICT, particularly smartphones and web-based social media platforms and messenger services, can be relevant for the understanding of current movements of people. After that, I review the most relevant literature on refugees' use of digital technology, thus providing some flesh to the theoretical armature of the entanglement of mobilities of people, objects, and information forming the analytical basis for this research.

#### **3.1 The role of technology in mobility studies**

Recent technological developments such as mobile phones, the internet, and social media have been met with extensive attention in the field of global mobility, migration, and diaspora studies (see for example Horst, 2006; Burrell & Anderson, 2008; Brinkerhoff, 2009; Thompson, 2009; Vertovec, 2009; Komito, 2011; Madianou & Miller, 2012). The rapid development of ICT has brought about new focuses, and challenged old paradigms and models concerning the mobility of people, goods, and information. Hannam, Sheller and Urry (2006) point out that the compression of time and space enabled by new technologies brings about new perceptions and imaginations of proximity and thus transforms corporeal experiences of mobility, creating intersections between physical, virtual, and imaginative mobilities (p.4). Mobile and especially internet-based communication modes bridge spatial and temporal distances at a new velocity and magnitude, and “melt physical and virtual, bringing new problems of border between private and public, between 'dis-placement' and place” (Lemos, 2010, p.413).

At the same time, others have argued that the new-found emphasis on technologies too often portrays them as the main catalyst for modern globalization and thus falls for a technological determinism. As Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002) have pointed out, particularly in the first wave of globalization studies, the idea of modernity as shaped by an unprecedented degree of global connectedness facilitated by the development of technology has led to this determinist view of technological development as the driving force of a changing world:



The power of the new technology combined with the postmodern insistence on the stability of the past and the fluidity of the present led to a rather crude technological determinism strangely contrasting with the otherwise constructivist impetus of much of this literature. (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002, p.322).

More nonchalantly, Cresswell has criticized the increasing focus of current mobility research under the “new mobilities paradigm” (Sheller & Urry, 2006) as “the tendency to celebrate ‘gee-whiz’ technologies such as fancy airport hubs and GPS” (Cresswell, 2010b, p.556) without acknowledging the role of former developments leading to this seemingly predominant role of technology in the modern world.

I agree with this skepticism insofar as the development, use, and impact of new technologies cannot be viewed as separated from socio-economic and political contexts; technological progress is not a detached process stirring the direction of history towards and beyond (Western notions of) “modernity”, but to a certain extent reflects and interacts with systems of power that it is embedded in. Nevertheless, I would also argue that there are aspects to recent technological developments that deserve analytical focus in contemporary research on human mobility. I do not think that a focus on the connections enabled by new technologies in any way diminishes the role of previous, often-cited development such as the steam engine (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). The point of this thesis is not to contribute to the ongoing debate of the degree and potential novelty of “globalization” (see for instance Lewellen, 2002), and I am not trying to argue that technological development is the only or even most determining factor in the mobile patterns and practices of people. However, as I show in the following part of this chapter as well through my own empirical findings, it can hardly be denied that particularly web-based technologies add a new quality to the exchange of information in virtual spaces.

I thus argue with Nardi (2015) that digital technologies can in some contexts indeed be seen as “game-changing objects” for interlinked trajectories of human, imaginative, and information mobility which cannot be analyzed with the same methodological and analytical focus as ‘old’ media (p.19). They enable potentially new understandings of mobility by increasingly merging virtual and spatial activity, and the recent focus on mobile connection and communication prompts reconsiderations regarding especially the entanglement between mobilities of information and the physical mobility of people and objects by transforming places beyond their immediate physical

features.

Particularly internet-based social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter challenge dichotomous notions of presence and absence by creating a “low-level ambient presence” (Komito, 2011, p.1084), allowing the silent monitoring of the online activities of others, and extend network ties beyond the scope of direct personal contacts. Similarly, Witteborn (2015) argues that “the multimodal nature of new technologies shapes mediated sociality and enables co-presence, self-presentation and networked mobilization in new ways” (p.5). Indeed, Dekker and Engbersen (2014) show that the wide-spread use of online social media platforms has transformed personal social network structures by enabling the strengthening of “weak” social ties by interactions online, or establishing latent ties between formerly disconnected actors. Social network platforms enable a “multi-directional flow of information and resources” (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014, p.403) and thus more individual-driven modes of communication and information exchange than “traditional” media outlets. The exchange of information via new ICTs is constant and timely, and communication is almost instantaneous, with a vast variety of “media rich” content such as text, images, or (live) videos (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014, p.408). This content is usually rather short-lived and challenges notions of the persistence of information (Nardi, 2015). Lemos (2010) uses the term “post mass-media functions” to describe this decentralized production, exchange, and flow of information via new technologies, with communication rather than mere information provision as their main function. Thus, new ICT and media operate on “niche”-based networks rather than primarily geographical or family ties, which allows the extension of personal network ties beyond the scope of traditional community models and personal acquaintanceship. Through this extension and transformation of network ties in the personal information networks of individual users, new ICT create a “deterritorialized social space” (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014, p.408) that in some ways transcends limitations in space of time, allowing the user to be “present” or “absent” in physical and virtual locations at the same time.

This virtual space itself cannot be understood as entirely detached from spatial localities. Rather, as Lemos (2010) has argued, the functionality of such technologies and the networks in which they operate is thickly entangled with particular locations. This relationship between the virtual and the spatial realm becomes apparent for example in GPS devices and apps that provide virtual information on physical locations that help the user “map out” and thus make sense of their surroundings. Digital technologies as “locative media” can be understood as “a new form of writing and reading the urban space [...], as a way of reappropriation of creation in an urban space” (Lemos, 2010, p.405). Therefore, de Souza e Silva and Sutko (2011) argue that this augmentation of

the physical through the digital and, on the other hand, the physical as a “source for digital information” in locative media create a technological landscape in which the “virtual” and the “real” cannot be understood as separate spheres (p.26).

The entanglement of virtual information exchange via ICT with the material reality of space thus implies that the “flow” of information has the potential to transform particular localities. Lemos (2010) describes this new layer to the process of meaning-making of places as “informational territory” that comprises the relations of power inherent in the information exchange via digital technologies in certain locations and putting it in relation to other territories:

By accessing the Internet through these [sic] network and devices, the user is in an area of informational control within other territorialities. It means he or she can control what to receive and what to produce, but has to deal with other forms of power and control (other territories). The informational territory is bound to a physical territory (political, legal, cultural, imaginary, etc.), but it transforms, by the means of electronic data (their rules, codes of access, speed), the function of this place. [...] The informational territory changes the place because all places are dependent on the synergy between imaginary, subjective, corporeal, technological, legal territories. (Lemos, 2010, p.406).

Concretely, this means that for instance internet access (or the lack thereof) in particular locations takes part in the negotiation of the *meaning* of this location as a place by adding a functional layer to the mere spatial level. The territories Lemos refers to are “place[s] of social control of borders, of informational exercise of surveillance and violence” (2010, p.405). The negotiations of those territories in certain locations thus produce places that, in horizontal and vertical interactions between each other and their respective territories of meaning, constitute space (p.409).

This presupposes the significance of physical structures in certain locations that enable the flow of information via digital devices. More concretely, Sheller and Urry (2006) point out that systems of mobility presuppose systems of immobility and thus asymmetries with regard to access to mobility as a resource (p.211). The accumulation of mobility resources, especially in a spatial or territorial sense, enables mobility for some people, but at the same time inhibits the movement of other actors by creating “zones of connectivity, centrality, and empowerment in some cases, and of disconnection, social exclusion, and inaudibility in other cases” (p.210), thus shaping the meaning

of place asymmetrically. These asymmetries affect “objects of mobility” (Horst & Taylor, 2014) – or “mobility machines” (Sheller & Urry, 2006) such as cars, trains, or in this case phones – as they depend on immobile structures and material arrangements in space: cars and trains require extensive traffic infrastructure; mobile phones need to be charged regularly; SIM cards only work within the given boundaries of specific cell coverage networks. Even though the devices as such are “mobile”, they are still bound to specific places through infrastructure and networks, thus adding another functional layer or “territory” to the ongoing process of the negotiation of space.

Based on those theoretical considerations, I argue that the involvement of ICT in the creation of space has several implications for the study of human mobility. They blur the line between the mobility of people and the mobility of information and the devices through which information is accessed and exchanged, because the boundaries between the “virtual” (the digital movement of information) and the “real” (the spatial movement of objects and people) are eradicated; the virtual is actualized in the spatial world, while the spatial world serves as an interface for digital practices. Indeed, ICT as locative media break up the “false duality of information and the materiality containing that information” (de Souza e Silva & Sutko, 2011, p.36).

ICT can thus serve as a nexus for different layers of mobility because of their involvement in the creation of space. Seen from this perspective, digital technologies and their role in the constitution of space can challenge essentialist notions of space as a compilation of separated entities, for instance along lines of national borders. However, as shall be shown in the next chapters, imagined national territories and the resulting practices of border control are equally a part in the constitution of place and interact with other seemingly “trans-national” territories such as the virtual realm. Also, practices of surveillance, censorship and (purposeful) misinformation create control and power relations defining the boundaries of informational territories. As Lemos points out, the new functions of space brought about by ICT presuppose the emergence of “new forms of control, access, surveillance, forms of openness and closeness (passwords, access profiles etc.)” (Lemos, 2010, p.412). Thus, the seemingly free and unhindered flow of information situated in the “flat” power hierarchies of social media is nevertheless influenced and restricted by other territories of power, which, in turn, are constituted through regimes of control. In this way, place becomes a “form of seizure of the world” (Lemos, 2010, p.411).

### 3.2 Refugees and mobile technologies

As elaborated on in the previous part of this chapter, mobile phones connect different spheres of mobility by making information accessible that allows their users to be physically mobile, enabling communicative and virtual mobility, and being themselves mobile objects that “travel” from place to place (Larsen, Urry, & Axhausen, 2006, p.49). With regard to the regimes of mobility framing and regulating the mobility of refugees, it is thus interesting to see how the use of technology is involved in the construction of particular places such as border regions, refugee camps or other localities that are understood to be focal points on the trajectories of refugee populations.

In the previous sub-chapter, I have mapped out the way in which the mobilities of people, objects, and information circulating with the help of those objects are entangled in the construction and negotiation of space. In the case of refugee mobility, this becomes important when the creation of space via the use of ICT challenges or, at times, reinforces the power relations structuring the “grid” along which refugee mobility is regulated. Border controls, smuggler networks, but also specifically targeted aid operations follow regulations based on assumptions about how, where, and when “refugees” move or should move. In those interpretative regimes that are (often) embedded in a mutually constitutive relationship with regulations and targeted policies, certain “stops” characterizing the “refugee experience” emerge, commonly border points, refugee camps, or detention. So-called “transfer points” (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p.219) that seem to be an inevitable part of the “refugee experience” are commonly stations of immobility that stand in contrast to the mobility processes they represent and that demonstrate how mobilities of objects and the mobilities of people relying on those objects cannot be understood as separate spheres. It is thus no surprise that most academic literature concerning the technology use of refugees is located at such perceived transfer points – usually camps (Iaria, 2011; Maitland & Xu, 2015; Wall et al., 2015), detention centers (Leung, 2010), or after “settlement” in the country where the refugees file their asylum application (Wilding, 2009; R. Richardson, 2010; Lloyd, Kennan, Thompson, & Qayyum, 2013; Alam & Imran, 2015; Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016) – at stages of perceived physical immobility or even the “end point” of peoples' trajectories as refugees. Based on the findings of this literature, it becomes clear that digital technology can both challenge imposed meanings of such places by appropriating the power structures inherent in the layers (or, with Lemos, territories) of functionality forming those places, and in other cases perpetuate and enforce them.

An example for the former case is Horst's and Taylor's (2014) study on construction of border regions, which reveals how technological materiality can be relevant for the construction of places and the

trajectories of people across these places. By interviewing workers involved in cross-border trading transactions in the border region of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, they identified mobile phones to be among the “objects of mobility” that regulate movement at the border with their “practical and symbolic properties” (p.160). They permit, for example, the transfer and circulation of non-material goods such as information and capital independently of the mobility of people, and thus circumvent certain restrictions of physical mobility set by the border. Mobile phones in border regions are thus objects involved in practices of mobility and contribute to the “materiality of the border” (p.160), while at the same time permeating the border's material realm by enabling the cross-border flow of non-material goods. In other words, “mobile phones effectively help people to overcome the border's restrictions and access the benefits that the border itself helps to create” (p.157). This leads to an ambiguous duality of border regions as, on the one hand, inhibitors of mobility, and on the other hand regions that “provide opportunities for economic and social arbitrage” (p.157) because of the involvement of mobile phones, thus challenging the layer of meaning of the border area as a locality encompassed in its material designs by appropriating that very materiality and changing the power structures in the negotiation between material and informational territories. In this sense, mobile phones can “act as a proxy for people through negating the need for physical mobility” (p.166). For refugees, phones can therefore serve as “an indispensable 'space-adjusting' technology, enabling them to establish a network to enact a strategy for communicative defense in the face of existential, juridical and political insecurity”, thus gaining importance as tools of achieving “ontological security” (Harney, 2013, p.542) in their mobile trajectories.

At the same time, phones in their role as objects of mobility can be subject to restrictions of mobility and thus serve as “catalysts” for functional limitations in space meant to regulate and contain the mobility of certain categories of people, for example when their functionality is limited by deficient infrastructure, and they thus become a factor of immobility themselves for their users (Sheller and Urry, 2006; Hannam et al., 2006). Particularly in the context of displacement, the material and functional designs of mobile phones can impose limitations on who can use them, as well as when and where: “they are expensive, can potentially be lost, may not be able to be used in a different national network when asylum seekers flee across national borders and can be dependent on vulnerable mobile network stations in conflict zones” (Leung, 2010, p.58.10). Especially smartphones are generally rather sensitive to weather conditions and have a much shorter battery life than ordinary mobile phones. While they enable their users to make use of more information sources than regular phones by providing internet access and customizable application interfaces, they also have a greater need for regular access to power stations. The operation of mobile phones thus requires some

organization and maintenance and thus time as a resource from their users, as well as infrastructure rooted in certain localities. Limited access to hardware and phone and cellular or internet networks inhibits access to communication opportunities, especially in structurally weak areas such as provisional refugee camps or in war-torn areas (Leung, 2010; Wall et al., 2015). Vernon et al. (2016), for instance, report that twenty percent of the global refugee population in rural areas are left without access to mobile coverage (p.7). Maitland and Xu (2015) found that not only unavailability, but also overuse and congestion of networks in certain “transitory points” such as refugee camps can create problems for those who do have access to phones and SIM cards. As a result, refugees are forced to appropriate the use of technological components such as SIM cards, along with their own needs, for example by lending out their own SIM cards to friends, or owning and using multiple SIM cards from the same or different providers at the same time. This, on the one hand, enables them to bypass congested cellular networks and connect with others via phone; on the other hand, it limits the exchange of information for example with aid workers or UNHCR personnel in the camp, because refugees constantly change their phone numbers and cannot be reached easily (Maitland & Xu, 2015, p.5). Thus, by trying to circumvent the limits to functionality imposed on them by their location in a refugee camp, they run the risk of becoming even more entrapped in unequal power structures, because they are cut off from the aid organizations on the elevated end of the (metaphorical and literal) line.

The unequal control over the meaning of space rooted in asymmetrical power structures within and among the different layers of functionality lending meaning to a place becomes visible here. Apart from limitations of mobility arising from the material design of technological devices, the access to landscapes of information exchange they provide has the potential to shape refugees' experience of (im)mobility and thus their trajectories for them in both positive and negative ways. For example, ICT and the data trajectories they create can be used by state actors in order to deter and impede on the personal security of refugees, for instance by the implementation of European-wide connected data bases such as Eurodac, making it more difficult for refugees to be physically mobile across borders within Europe (Harney, 2013, p.551). Border control is thus to a certain extent shifted from fixed localities to the body of the migrant (Mountz et al., 2013, p.532). Furthermore, the surveillance of phone connections or posts on social media platforms by states or other potentially dangerous actors such as militias can be a tremendous source of precarity for refugees fleeing from persecution and violence (Wall et al., 2015) and thus render places “unsafe”. Countries such as Belgium and Germany have recently opened a discussion about allowing authorities to conduct “security checks” on asylum seekers’ phones and social media profiles; thus, for asylum seekers, “their own smart



devices, their social media profiles or simply the telecommunication network they have to connect to can be used by governmental or other actors to control them and sort them socially” (Bellanova, Gabrielsen Jumbert, & Gellert, 2016), hence factually controlling and shaping both their virtual and physical mobilities.

Finally, understanding mobility as practice and acknowledging that spheres of human, object, and information mobility are in fact intersecting at new technologies as a nexus point suggests the importance of particular information processing practices for processes of mobility. The information landscapes<sup>2</sup> for which ICT operate as a medium to access, obtain, and share vital information requires a certain set of skills and practices. However, just like the physical structures enabling access to these information landscapes, the skills to access information are spread asymmetrically and enable the mobility of some, while ostracizing those possessing inadequate or no skills (cf. Alam & Imran, 2015; Lloyd et al., 2013). Social factors such as gender, age, or social status (cf. Kaufmann, Bergman, & Joye, 2004) can impact on the affordability of technologies or the skills to operate them. For instance, Wall et al. (2015) point out how especially unmarried and elderly women in refugee camps often do not have access to mobile phones and thus have to rely on “inadequate, sporadic, and random” (p.7) information sources such as listening to conversations when queuing for food, which additionally marginalizes those without the physical capacity to move within the camp.

<sup>2</sup> I am adhering to the definition of information landscapes as “the taken for granted and agreed on modalities of information that are understood by people who are engaged in the collective practices and performances of that landscape” (Lloyd et al. 2013, p.130). They are not to be confused with Lemos’ (2010) “informational territories”, which are an expression of the forms information exchange can take in a certain location and thus contribute to the negotiation of this location as a “place”.



## **4. Research process**

Before connecting the previously elaborated theoretical outline of this research to my own findings, I provide a short overview of the process of data collection and interpretation in this chapter. I first describe my research design as well as the research process, before discussing why this research – despite not being ethnographic in the strict sense – is still oriented along elements of ethnographic methods. I also line out some ethical considerations regarding this research.

### **4.1 Data collection**

The main source of data collection for this research were interviews with asylum seekers from Iraq, who had come to Finland at the “peak” of the increased refugee influx between 2014 and 2016. I conducted eleven individual semi-structured, narrative interviews (Bernard, 1994) with those asylum seekers. Additionally, I conducted online observation of interactions between users in Facebook groups for refugees.

The interview participants were exclusively men born in Iraq, who were between 21 and 45 years of age. At the time of the interviews, only one of them had received a positive decision on his asylum application; yet, according to my best knowledge, all of them were still living in Finland at the time of the publication of this thesis. The contact with most interview participants was established via a Facebook group for refugees and volunteers in Finland, where I posted an announcement about my research intentions and gave interested people the possibility to contact me online. By “outsourcing” the initiative for participation, I aimed to assure that the interview participants wanted to talk about their experiences voluntarily and did not feel pressurized or forced by me approaching them individually and in person (Lee, Fielding, & Blank, 2008, p.29). However, I initially also recruited asylum seekers at a local NGO in Helsinki with the consent of the managing director and conducted interviews with them, before turning to Facebook as my main recruitment platform. Lastly, I made use of snowball sampling by asking my interview partners to forward my contact details to friends and acquaintances in Finland who might be willing to participate in the interviews.

The interviews were conducted face to face in the bigger Helsinki region, with the exception of one interview that was arranged via Skype. I met with the majority of the interviewees in public places such as cafés and libraries, as well as at the office space of the aforementioned NGO. The conversations lasted between 30 and 120 minutes and, except for one interview that was

documented in writing, were recorded with the consent of the interview participants. All recordings were deleted after the transcription of the interviews, and all names of places and people were anonymized in the transcripts to ensure confidentiality regarding the identities of the study participants. At the beginning of each interview, I explained my academic background as well as the purpose of my research. I further guaranteed anonymity and the freedom to end the interview at any point or to refuse to answer certain questions. I also tried to encourage the participants from the very beginning to correct me if they felt that my approach towards the subject was fundamentally flawed, and to take initiative whenever they felt that they would want to contribute aspects that I could not come up with myself, which most of them did.

Despite having prepared a questionnaire with about twenty questions, I thus aimed at keeping the conversation open and informal so as not to impose my own pre-defined narrative structure on their stories. I aimed at asking relatively open-end questions leaving space for “probing” (Bernard, 1994, p.215-18). The first set of questions related to the experiences they made “en route”, during their journey. I asked them to describe the reasons for their decision to leave Iraq, as well as their journey from Iraq to Finland in as much detail as possible. I also inquired about what kind of technological devices they brought along, when and how they used them, as well as situations in which they felt that technology was particularly useful or not useful at all to them. The second set of questions related to the research participants' lives in Finland and the role that especially social media plays for them in organizing various aspects of their everyday life here. In addition to the recordings of the conversations, I also made notes in my field journal during and after each interview, which included important points that I wanted to remember later, new aspects or theoretical considerations coming to mind on the basis of my interview partners' answers, or other observations regarding the interview situation.

In hindsight, I am inclined to view the structuring of the interview following the constructed story line from the interviewees' country of origin to their arrival in Finland rather critically. As already explained before, the artificial separation of the “refugee experience” into clearly separable stages of their journey not only reproduces a methodological nationalism in confining the narrative of their experienced mobility within national borders, but as a consequence also essentializes the “refugee experience” by yanking it out of its historical, social, and political contexts (Godin & Doná, 2016). While the narrative of my interlocutors was indeed structured along lines of national borders (all of them listed the countries they crossed when asked to describe their journey), this might on the one hand be a reflection of the structure of my questionnaire, but on the other hand, as I show in the following chapter, also demonstrates the effect of national border regimes on the experience of

mobility for the interviewees. Nevertheless, I am particularly thankful to K. who has pointed out this flaw in my methodology and advised me to focus more on the initial conditions creating the need for him and others to be mobile in this particular way.

I stayed in contact with most of my interview partners via Facebook and continued to communicate with them online and, in some cases, in person. Some would also send me additional information and thoughts regarding the topics of our conversation afterwards, as well as updates about their current situation. A first draft of this thesis was also sent to all those who wished to read it before publication, so as to give them the chance to correct misinterpretations or point out potentially neglected points. Thus, “the interview” became in fact an extended process of exchange both offline and online, and spread to the (on my part) subconscious observation of the online activities of my interview partners even after the time of data collection, which might have affected the way in which I interpreted my findings. Notions of “before” and “after” data collection (or possibly “inside” and “outside” the field) are thus not necessarily holding up. As Jackson (2016) points out, when it comes to online research, the field is always present due to its rootedness in social media connections and thus “has become an increasingly abstract metaphor” (p.59).

Since my research aims to shed light on the nexus between online and offline practices of asylum seekers, I decided to include both “online and offline data” (Orgad, 2009) in my analysis. For this reason, I also observed the interactions in three different Facebook groups for refugees in Finland. I paid attention to shared posts in the form of articles, texts, pictures, videos, live broadcasts, and links, as well as the reactions and comment threads. Data was collected mainly by means of “jotting” or “scratch notes” (Sanjek, 1990) in my field journal; I refrained from taking screen shots to circumvent privacy concerns and protect the identity of the active users in the groups. I continued to be a member of those groups even after the end of my dedicated observation period, so that posts and news pieces shared in those groups continued to show up on my personal Facebook feed and thus possibly influenced the contexts in which I understood and interpreted previously collected data. However, as the focus of this thesis has shifted in the process of knowledge creation, the data collected during this step of the research process has not provided as many tangible approaches to making sense of the role of locative technologies as the in-depth conversations with my interlocutors. The lack of contextualization of the observed interactions might be one of the reasons for that.

The data interpretation process followed at large the four steps lined out by Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor (2012, p. 164-76), namely viewing, systematizing, thematizing, and finally developing narratives and theoretical arguments. Firstly, I collected and viewed my textual data

both in digital form (interview transcripts) and on paper (field notes in my field journal, printed out transcripts). Then, I systematized the data I collected by adding key words relating to different aspects of my research question. Due to the constant interplay between theoretical and empirical considerations as lined out by Cerwonka and Malkki (2007), this process of systematizing was fluid and constantly adjusted with the finding of new interconnections and similar or opposite aspects in the narratives of my interview partners, as well as the data collected from online observations. The process of tagging key words and certain parts of the textual data thus intersected many times with the “coding” stage that consisted of thematizing data by discovering patterns and drawing overarching connections. Similarly, the final stage of theorizing my findings was an underlying feature of the systematization process of my data, but also transformed in the ongoing process of analysis, as I could draw new connections and thus readjust and re-think theoretical conceptualizations.

## **4.2 Ethnographic influences**

As some authors have argued, a focus on interviews is not sufficient for a research design to truly hold up to ethnographic standards (cf. Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.92). Retrospective accounts of past events in an interview situation cannot replace the emergence in the field and fail to capture for example practices that are not consciously accessible for the interlocutors to retrieve in an interview situation. As Hine (2008) puts it, “the key ethnographic principle [is] developing understanding through participation and through a progressive collection of data and focusing of enquiry” (p.259). While my research topic could be considered multi-sited (Marcus, 1995), since it covers mobile trajectories over big temporal and spatial distances and activities spanning virtual and physical realms, my data collection itself is set in a rather static environment, namely one-time conversations. I could not follow the study participants on their journeys and thus submerge in the field conducting participant observation in the traditional sense, but had to rely mainly on their personal retrospective accounts of past events. However, I think that it can nonetheless provide insights that are valid for this particular group of people in the particular setting of the research, which potentially allows for inferences regarding the practices of other groups and settings. Thus, while I do not consider this research to be ethnographic as such, I did borrow from concepts and principles of ethnographic research, particularly while conducting the interviews and in the process of interpreting my data, acknowledging and embracing the constant interplay between empirical findings and theoretical conceptualizations. As Cerwonka and Malkki (2007) explain,

Rather than the scientific model, according to which one begins with a theoretical hypothesis, tests it, and then finds it true or false, the interpretive process involves a continuous movement between explanations (theory) about the object or process at issue and the parts that force adjustment or reaffirm the researcher's initial 'guessing'. (p.19)

Knowledge creation and fieldwork in ethnographic research are always subject to “the circular nature of interpretation” (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007, p.6), floating between “activity and understanding” (p.5). Theoretical premises need to be constantly adjusted to observations, actions and understanding on the ground, while those observations at the same time need to be evaluated through a theoretical lens of some sort. I tried to adhere to this ethnographic understanding of knowledge production in my own research, for example by re-evaluating my questionnaire during and after every interview and trying to leave space for other stories relating to my interview partners' experiences, even if they were not covered directly by my questions. In qualitative interviews following such principles, interview participants are understood to be “meaning makers, not passive conduits for retrieving information from an existing vessel of answers” (Warren, 2001, p.83). Thus, I understand interviews as a co-construction of knowledge depending on the setting and positionality of the researcher and the interviewees (cf. Sherman Heyl, 2007). Analyzing the narratives of the interviewees can be understood as an interactive process of jointly constructing and interpreting experience with others, therefore narrative analysis is potentially a means of examining participant roles in constructing accounts and in negotiating perspectives and meanings” (Cortazzi, 2007, p.384).

Another important insight borrowed from ethnographic research for my own study is the recognition that the positionality of the researcher is an unavoidable factor in the process of knowledge creation that needs to be acknowledged and reflected upon (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007). Thus, I have tried to adapt what Spradley termed “a conscious attitude of almost complete ignorance” (2016, p.4). As a white, educated, middle-class female European citizen without any previous personal experience of violence and expulsion, who has never visited the Middle Eastern region in general and Iraq in particular, owning a valid passport that allows me to legally travel to almost everywhere, my own framing of the research question of this paper as well as my interpretation and analysis of my interview partners' answers are always contextualized according to my own situatedness in this particular social environment. While I have tried my best to understand

and, in the limited ways possible, relate to the experiences of my interview partners, I cannot claim to represent them in an objective or even entirely appropriate way.

### **4.3 Ethical considerations**

With regard to the observation of the online activities on Facebook groups for refugees, the problem of “lurking” (cf. Schrooten, 2016) tied in with requirements of informed consent in scientific research should be considered. The observation of social media activity on online platforms such as Facebook, with decentralized and multi-directional flows of information complicates the notion of what constitutes “public” and “private” information or, in that sense, research data. This also relates to the complications in obtaining explicit consent from all users active in certain social media groups to “observe” their posts and activities for the sake of scientific research.

While this problem is not limited to the field of online research, but is common also for example in “real-life” situations of participant observation within a certain field, I would argue that it is generally easier for the researcher to stay “invisible” in the observation process online than with her being physically present in the field. Additionally, the degrees of private and public information on social media are rather vague; the mere public availability of online data might not guarantee the consent of the user to use them in a research context. Two of the groups which I observed for my study were private, that is, only admitted members could view and produce content. The third group was secret, so that it could not be found via the conventional Facebook search, and members could only be added by the initiative of those already in the group. Sveningsson Elm (2009) suggests that content that is more general and situated at a societal level does not necessarily require the explicit consent of all users within the studied environment for the researcher to use this data, but that private and sensitive matters that particularly concern individuals' life stories are not to be used without explicit consent. As a consequence of those considerations of privacy, I refrained from using direct quotes from Facebook conversations in this thesis, as well as from “stalking” my interview partners' private social media profiles to learn more about their online behavior before their arrival in Finland. As Boellstorff et al. (2012) point out, “we may want to avoid specific quotes in particularly loaded scenarios, pulling back to a more abstract or observational level of analysis” (p.139). For this reason, I limited myself to general observations with regard to the data collected from Facebook groups, so that the inherent risk of breaches of anonymity should be relatively low, and inferences about the identity of specific people providing content in those groups are rather impossible to draw.

Another issue relating to the power relations between researcher and “research subjects” is the clarification of intention on part of the researcher, and the clear communication of those intentions to the research participants: “the logic of informed consent presumes that the respondent will understand the intent of the research, as it is explained by the researcher” (Warren, 2001, p.89). Most of my interview partners contacted me after I published my call for study participants on Facebook, because they understood the intention of my study and were willing to contribute on their own accord. In addition, most of my interview partners have an academic background and understood the purpose of my thesis as well as the confidentiality standards of academic work. However, the language barrier created obstacles in some cases, so that I could not always verify that my intention was fully clear to the interview participants, even if they claimed so.

Finally, I feel it is necessary to again address the role of the researcher in framing the terms and possibly contributing to regimes of power. I have already elaborated on the danger of essentializing refugees as an analytical category in chapter 2. Additionally, particularly with regard to the actuality of the so-called “refugee crisis” in recent years, refugee research has become a popular field for social scientists. A vast number of research publications on diverse aspects of the current refugee situation has been produced, and particularly the topic of refugees and technology use present in this thesis is prompting new publications almost every month. “Refugees” as an analytical category are therefore increasingly running the risk of becoming “overresearched” (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2012), which more than ever necessitates the critical review and appliance of research ethics with regard to researchers' positionality and power asymmetries in our work. Related to this, the “dual imperative of refugee research” (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003), reflecting expectations that research on refugees should be relevant both for academia and policy making, has been a source of insecurity for me throughout this research process. It also relates to the inequality of benefit drawn from the research (cf. Sukarieh & Tannock, 2012); while this thesis will have positive consequences for myself, as it allows me to graduate from university, there probably will not be any direct benefit for my interview partners. I sincerely hope that the participants of this study are not disappointed in the way their experiences and knowledge have been processed in the course of this thesis, even though there might be no immediate positive impact on policy making or on their personal life situation.



## **5. Becoming a refugee**

The aim of this chapter is to frame the context of my interlocutors' mobility within the social, legal, and political circumstances in which their movement took place and which affected their experience of that movement. Thus, I hope that with this chapter, I am able at least to some degree to de-essentialize the mobility of refugees by explaining how it cannot be reduced to the mere physical movement between a "country of origin" and a "country of arrival", but how the experience of mobility is shaped through practices and representation which are more often than not regulated by encounters with politics of mobility and respective regimes.

While some of my interview partners did not want to talk about the time before leaving their home country as well as some of their experiences on the road, others explicitly wished for me to include a chapter about the reasons for leaving Iraq, because they felt that their stories could not be understood outside this broader context. As I have guaranteed anonymity to all of them, I refrain from giving too detailed accounts of individual stories and rather provide summaries and general background information concerning their experiences. I hope to do at least some justice to the complex entanglement of individual life situations and bigger societal developments.

### **5.1 Living in post-invasion Iraq**

To begin with, I shall elaborate on the entanglement of changing and fragile societal structures and the experiences of personal persecution that lead my interview partners to the choice of leaving Iraq and applying for asylum in Finland. As Crawley (2010) points out, "the term 'choice' is a contentious one when applied to asylum seekers" and "can only be understood in the context of the circumstances under which individuals leave their countries of origin" (p.20). The social and political circumstances "at home" play a significant part in shaping the experience of mobility as voluntary or forced. Most of the study participants did, indeed, refer to their "choice" or "decision" of leaving their home country, while at the same time making it clear that any other options would have been unbearable.

The current political situation in Iraq is coined by civil unrest, political and economic turmoil, as well as violent contestations. In the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of the country by the US-led coalition, the overthrow of the Baath party's regime and the restructuring of the state, living conditions have deteriorated, and civilian life has been affected by unemployment, little personal



and professional perspectives for the future, dissatisfaction with government elites, as well as a violent environment of civil wars and militia activities.

In recent years, the war against the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) from 2014 onwards has deteriorated the security situation within the country, giving rise to growing influence of armed groups that mainly elude governmental control. Not surprisingly, it is predominantly the civilian population that carries the burden of those destabilizing conditions. As the Iraq Body Count (2016) project reports, the tremendous increase in civilian casualties in Iraq with more than 20 000 civilians killed in 2014 and more than 16 000 in the following year was mainly brought about by the emergence of IS and the resulting executions and violent hostilities, including battles and air strikes executed by the allied forces. In addition, other armed groups and particularly Shia militia fighting either on the side of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) against IS or acting independently have been reported to increasingly exercise extra-judicial actions against civilians (Human Rights Watch, 2016). All in all, almost a tenth of the entire population finds itself displaced within or outside Iraq's borders as a result of the spreading violence all over the country (World Bank 2016).

The rising costs for humanitarian aid and state security resulting from the fight against IS have met the Iraqi state at a time of already tense economic circumstances, coinciding with a sharp fall in the oil price in 2014 (World Bank, 2016). This development at the same time exacerbated the decline in employment rates since the dismantling of the Baath state apparatus in 2003 (Yousif, 2010), so that current employment rates in Iraq are still among the lowest in the Middle Eastern region (World Bank, 2016). The public sector continues to be the main employer, yet access to it is regulated by a patronage system based on party loyalty aimed at securing the influence of the ruling elite. Thus, those who do not want to or are unable to become part of this system of political patronage are left without perspective and often see their only chance to sustain a living for themselves and their families by joining militias or leaving the country (International Crisis Group (ICG), 2016). As K. explained to me during the interview,

*“After ISIS take – and what happened after 2014 – the economy of Iraq is disaster and destroyed. Many of the banks' money is gone. So many of jobs are stopped and many workers are released. So this made many people poor, and they didn't have another source to live.” (K.)*

It has therefore been argued that there is growing radicalization and violent tendencies particularly among the country's youth, rooted in a lack of perspectives for the future as well as in the structural conditions in which they had been growing up in the post-invasion years (ICG, 2016). The sectarian war in 2005-2007 manifested the divide of Iraq among provincial and regional lines, so that social connections were limited to immediate localities and consequently mainly to peers affiliated with the same religious subgroup, so that the generation growing up in times of the sectarian war was conditionalized in an environment that “constrains friendships, mobility, marriage choices and daily practices. [...] Geographical isolation has nurtured sectarianism by locking youths within the boundaries of their community” (ICG, 2016, p.10-11). This atmosphere of violent segregation came as a shock particularly to those of my interlocutors who had spent considerable time outside the country. S., who had been living abroad for most of his life before returning to Iraq in the mid-2000s, felt himself estranged from the violent atmosphere that had spread all over the country as a result of this segregation process:

*“After the war, the majority of Iraqi youth, they were uneducated, with a lot of society diseases. They were – I met them, and they were carrying a lot of hate. Killing for them doesn't really mean much, they lost a lot of their humanity, their concept of life is totally different than what I have learned and practiced and believed in.” (S.)*

This estrangement from the broad base of frustrated youth with little to no perspective for further education or professional prospects further enhances the problem of the (systematic) draining of the educated middle-class. As the ICG reports, even professionals do not earn enough wages to make a decent living. In addition, particularly young doctors and medical staff are often urged or threatened by militias to join them, without receiving any protection from the government:

Educated young people, the future professional middle class, are at the margin of political leaders' attention, hard hit by the budget crisis and society's militarization and facing a choice of adjusting to rule by armed groups or emigrating. (ICG, 2016, p.23)

The general dissatisfaction with and distrust towards the Iraqi government has become apparent in the conversations with my interview partners. S., visibly upset during the interview regarding the

situation of his home country, summarized the attitude of many young Iraqis particularly from the educated middle class:

*“What did Iraq provide me, what did Iraq as a country or home land offer me, even from the day I was born until this moment? Iraq did not ask about me if I was sick or hungry, or if I'm getting education or not when I was living outside Iraq. No one cared about me. The only thing they were caring about, that when I was 18, they asked me to go and join the army. They are ready to accept me as a dead body, wrapped in the Iraqi flag, but they don't want to care about me when I needed things that my government, or my country, could provide me.” (S.)*

While not caring for them, the government at the same time tries to counter the country's brain drain by making it difficult for professionals to leave the country, for example by reducing the possibilities of getting approved copies of their diplomas which they would need to be hired abroad (ICG, 2016, p.24).

While the economic prospects of even highly skilled people are currently low in Iraq, militia are furthermore increasingly trying to recruit skilled professionals for their own means, if necessary by force (ICG, 2016, p.23). However, it is often especially the highly educated that do not want anything to do with the militant groups and the violence they perpetrate, so that they feel forced to leave the country. Some of my interview partners expressed the opinion that the Iraqi government installed after the invasion in 2003 had an interest in keeping down the voices of educated citizens by specifically targeting certain professional groups with bully-boy tactics, or by employing militia forces to repress opposing voices:

*“After 2003, what they do? They kill many scientists. Many pilots. Many doctors. Engineers. You know, any specialist in economy and trade. They kill them. Why they do that, we don't know. They didn't just threaten them to leave this country, no, they killed them. [...] They didn't want to develop our country. They just want it like that.” (K.)*

*“All of our area, it's become with the militia. And they asked us many times to be with*

*them, to join them, that militia. They asked my father, and – it's not easy to tell them, no, I will not, I cannot.” (M.)*

While my interviewees' concrete reasons for fleeing from Iraq were versatile, their personal experiences of persecution are however embedded in those societal, political and economic conditions in their country of origin. Many of them reported the same issues of threats, persecution and sometimes violent assaults on them or their family members on grounds of their religious affiliation. The majority of my interview partners are Sunni Muslims, or find themselves associated with the Sunni religion due to tribal and family relations, names, or official administrative categorization, as institutionalized by the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) after 2003 (Proctor & Tesfaye, 2015, p.13):

*“I'm from a Sunni family. Not me, but my family. But I will be from them, people will say, this is a Sunni. They will not say, he is atheist or he is agnostic, no. And there was no place for the Sunni people after the ISIS came to Iraq.” (M.)*

*“Over there, I'm considered Sunni, even though I'm not a Muslim. I'm actually an atheist, but this is kind of the family secret, you know. You cannot be anything else, only Shia and Sunni, and it depends on your last name and the city that you live in. It's something that is decided for you. And it's all written in the ID card.” (J.)*

This religious affiliation that was often against the convictions and the will of my interview partners restricted them significantly in their everyday life activities back in Iraq. It limited, for example, to which cities or neighborhoods they could move without directly endangering their own life or the lives of family members, or it restricted them in exercising their professions. AH. owned a store selling alcohol in Baghdad and was regularly attacked by radical religious groups. T., who had been working for a well-known lawyer in his home city, reported how his boss was killed for his involvement in what T. phrased a “tribal” dispute, and how he himself received numerous threats against himself and his family, which prompted him to relocate first to a different city and finally to Finland. Most of them received immediate threats from predominantly Shia militia groups or sometimes government forces, and in many cases, they and their families were physically assaulted,

unlawfully detained, and tortured by what they identified to be militia henchmen:

*“When I moved from Iraq to Turkey, I was thinking I want to come back to Iraq, because my wife and daughter is in Iraq. [...] I called my wife and told her I will come back, after one week. I will come back from Turkey to Iraq. And she said to me, don't come, 'cause they are looking for you. And they hit my daughter, and hit my wife, and killed my wife's brother.” (T.)*

The targeting of my interlocutors along sectarian lines bare the deep division within Iraqi society, which is however rooted in the aforementioned socio-economic and political developments in recent decades rather than underlying historical identities merely finding expression in current conflicts. As Davis (2010) has pointed out, Western understandings of the allegedly predominant sectarian structures in Iraqi society are the product of a primordial “imaginative geography” (p.229) overlooking the social, political and economic context in which sectarian identities have been developed particularly in recent years. Rather than adhering to binary interpretations of sectarianism in Iraq as “primordial” or entirely “socially constructed”, he argues that there is a need to understand current activities of sectarian entrepreneurs as being situated in particular social context(s) in which they can thrive, including factors such as gender, age, class, or geographical location of their target groups (p.232).

As Yousif (2010) argues, the “abrupt liberalization of markets and prices” (p.362) – also known as the “shock therapy” - implemented by the CPA during the invasion has tremendously contributed in the lasting destabilization of the country by fostering the agenda of sectarian entrepreneurs. In the course of this restructuring process, the CPA fired more than half a million former state employees, leading to rising unemployment that disproportionately affected a Sunni part of the population formerly employed under the Baath regime. Those workers were mostly replaced with Shia or Kurds, often formerly exiled opponents of the Baath regime who had little to no skills or connection with the local population (ICG, 2016, p.4). In addition, this new administration – along with the remaining public sector staff – received a significant raise in wages (Yousif, 2010, p.362), which provided plenty of opportunity for sectarian entrepreneurs, such as clerics or local politicians aiming to strengthen their own political power by backing themselves with armed forces – to incite anger on the side of the disadvantaged Sunni.

The unemployment created by the re-structuring of the administrative apparatus thus drove people into the arms of militia groups. Particularly the dissolution of the former Iraqi army left a demographic of young men, who were trained for the fight with weapons and largely unintegrated into civilian society, without perspectives for the future, making them particularly perceptible to the sectarian rhetoric of militias and affiliated clerks. This had the ambiguous result of militias, rising from the chaos of rapidly increasing unemployment, asserting themselves as the “protectors” of civilians against that very chaos and securing financial resources from protective fees. Thus, “in the end, the problem was not that the labour market was defective but that it worked; labour was flowing to the highest bidder” (Yousif, 2010, p.363). Mobilization into militia has thus become “the best way to secure political and economic assets” for the ruling elites (ICG, 2016, p.17), while at the same time circumventing official procedures and securing assets such as UN-funding for themselves.

Furthermore, the expansion of IS into Iraqi territory has contributed to escalating sectarian tensions within the country by channeling the wide-spread dissatisfaction with the ruling elite into a sectarian matrix. The inability of the Iraqi army to keep IS troops at bay and particularly the IS victory in Mosul 2014 prompted many young Shia to protect their shrines and brought about the “hashd al-shaabi”, the massive recruitment of Shi'a fighters under the Popular Mobilization Forces (Mansour, 2016). Joining those armed militia groups provided an opportunity to sustain a living and at the same time gain social status, thus serving as a “social ladder” (ICG, 2016, p.17) for many recruits:

[it] had the unintended result of giving the Shiite community a leadership role in defense of the country, with Shiite teenagers eagerly compensating for the political class' failings by fighting IS in a war against their Sunni peers – in other words, precisely the sectarian conflict IS wanted. (ICG, 2016, p.16)

In other words, IS was able to systematically deepen divides between Sunni and Shia by reframing the general repudiation towards the political establishment and elites as a sectarian conflict, making use of the structural weaknesses within the Iraqi state (ICG, 2016, p.14). In K.'s experience, many Sunni initially joined IS because they considered it a political protest movement against the Iraqi

government, only to be disillusioned shortly after (see also Proctor & Tesfaye, 2015).

Thus, experiences of persecution and danger as expressed by my interlocutors need to be understood in the broader context of social, economic, and political developments in Iraq rather than mere individual stories, so as to counter de-politicizing processes of “abstracting displaced people from specific political, historical, and cultural milieus” (Godin & Doná, 2016, p.61). Yet, as I show in the upcoming sub-chapter, this political contextualization of the “refugee experience” has to span beyond the borders of a perceived “home country”, as encounters with other political and social regimes continue to shape experiences of mobility.

## **5.2 Encountering regimes of mobility**

The conditions in my interlocutors’ country of origin set the starting point for their experience of their journey as “refugees”, as an act of forceful displacement, driven by violent persecution and threat. Yet, it would be inadequate to reduce the driving factors for this experience of forceful displacement as confined to the borders of Iraq; their experience of “becoming a refugee” (Godin & Doná, 2016) was constantly transformed by mobile practices and encounters on the road. At the same time, the experience of their own mobility as “refugees” influenced how my interview partners would plan and execute their mobile trajectories. Thus, there is a constant process of adjustment and re-negotiation of the physical movement and mobile practices of those being mobile, and their experience of this mobility as “refugees” (cf. Ernste et al, 2012).

It is vital in this context to understand how the experience of my interlocutors’ mobility as “refugees” differentiates from their previous mobile trajectories. As already explained, all of my interview partners were born in Iraq, and the majority of them had lived in the greater Baghdad region for most of their lives. However, it became apparent rather quickly during the conversations that only a small minority had been staying in the same city or town their entire lives. Many of my interview partners had an extensive history of mobility within the country. K., for instance, reported that he was permanently on the move in Iraq because of his work. For some, also international movement was not a novelty. S. had spent his entire childhood and youth in Saudi Arabia and only moved back to Iraq as a young man. Also, as an experienced business traveler, he continued to frequent other parts of the world while being settled in Iraq. A. had worked in Sweden for a couple of years before returning to Iraq, and O. and his family left Iraq when he was 14 years old and spent five years in Turkey, before he and his father arrived in Finland. Some of them had also travelled as tourists to Europe or Asia before. With the exception of O., none of my interview partners indicated



that they perceived this particular movement as forceful. Similarly, most of my interlocutors continued to travel within Finland while waiting for a decision on their asylum application, to meet friends and family members in other cities or attend seminars, demonstrations, or explore potential employment opportunities. T., who was the only one to have received a positive decision on his application at the time of this research, also told how he had been travelling to see several European cities as a tourist, as well as to see his extended family in other parts of Europe, after obtaining travel documents in Finland.

Categorizations of “tourists”, “refugees”, “business travelers” or “work migrants” are thus not only temporary, but also only restrictedly descriptive for the mobility of individuals. They are fluent categories that are framed and reframed with the social and political circumstances of the movement, as well as with the respective experience of mobility.

On the other hand, experiences of forced mobility and displacement that contextualized my interlocutor's journey to Finland already started for many of them before they left Iraqi borders. Many study participants had moved within and between neighborhoods, cities and regions in Iraq, or internationally due to persecution, work, or family reasons before deciding to come all the way to Europe. K. explained how he and his family were expelled from their former home and had to move to a different neighborhood in Baghdad, because his father's property had been seized by the government. T., for fear of the militia in his neighborhood, had moved with his wife to her home village for a couple of months, before they were forced to return to their former neighborhood because of IS advances, where they were, however, met with hostility and mistrust by their former neighbors for leaving in the first place. For others, the journey to Finland was not their first visit to Europe, and for some it was not the first country in which they sought asylum. Similarly, given the rapidly sinking rate of approval for asylum applications from Iraqi nationals in Finland (Yle News, 2016a) and the tightened restrictions on family reunification (Yle News, 2016b), it is also rather likely that for some, their attempts to escape precarious conditions and persecution in their country of origin will not end with their arrival in Finland. Both “forced” and “voluntary” returns of asylum seekers, particularly to Iraq, have been on the rise, while it is, however, rather critical to distinguish whether “voluntary returns” really merit the term and where they are merely more than a euphemistic manifestation of the national asylum regime in Finland (see also Mountz et al., 2013).

Even the mobility as a designated asylum seeker within Finland could at times still be counted as part of the experience of forceful displacement. Several users on the observed Facebook groups complained about being transferred to and between reception centers by authorities against their will, particularly being moved to rural areas, while they would have liked to stay closer to bigger



cities.

Thus, it would be inadequate to understand the trajectories of refugees solely as a linear movement from Iraq to Finland, as the physical movement might not coincide with their experience of long on-going (and continuing) persecution and displacement. O. even corrected me when I asked him about his journey from Iraq to here and pointed out that he had actually travelled here from Turkey, thus indicating that the movement from Iraq to Turkey and the latest journey to Finland were not necessarily part of the same experience for him. For A., coming to Finland was his “second attempt” to leave Iraq after an unsuccessful trip to Iran, from where he was deported back to Iraq by the authorities; thus, his experienced trajectory is not necessarily limited to the journey from Iraq to Finland, but includes and is shaped by previous experiences of mobility.

For all of my interview partners, the conscious “decision” to leave Iraq usually took place before having a clear idea of where they would go. There was also no clear consensus among my interview partners about their reasons for choosing Finland as the country where they ultimately applied for asylum. M. recounts that he had planned to come to Finland before leaving his home country, due to personal interest:

*“I chose to be in Finland while I was in Iraq. [...] Sure, I didn't know anyone from Finland, but I was interested about the culture, because I'm a musician. So I read about that on the internet, on Facebook, some social media, that Finland is – most of the people are interested about music. And I will not find some problems with the language, most of the people here speak English.” (M.)*

Similarly, K. had been planning his journey to Finland a long time in advance, mainly based on the information he collected online about family reunification possibilities. He pointed out to have studied Finland for more than one year, always with regard to the looming threat created by the militia, and when the time to leave his home country came, he felt limited in his final decision making process:

*“I study this for one or two years. So it's not easy for me to take another decision or take another country. Because I make many study about Finland, the people of Finland, what is the work, what they want, how they're treating the refugees, how many people*

*come to Finland... you know, it take me one and a half years. So I cannot immediately take another country.” (K.)*

Generally, my interview partners referred to the secure and non-violent situation in Europe and particularly the Northern countries as the reason for choosing to apply for asylum there. Other reasons included religious freedom, family reunification possibilities, and – according to the information they had at that point – the general chances of being granted asylum in a comparatively short time frame. J. and T. explained their decision-making processes:

*“What I really liked, and the reason that made me really think about Finland in the first place is that I never heard about this country in the news or something. This is a country where – you know, it's not involved in any conflict or any bad thing happening in the world. So I figured that this is a peaceful place to live, and I knew that the Nordic countries in general – you pick your religion and you speak freely about your thoughts, and no one gets to bother you about it.” (J.)*

*“I did searching in Google about the status in Europe. And I saw to Finland, is very good to me, because they respect the protection, the health is very good here, the people don't have racism... but that's not the truth [laughs].” (T.)*

Many also argued that they had heard that there were not as many asylum seekers in Finland as in other European countries, which they thought would increase their chances of being granted asylum. They usually compared the regulations and processes of asylum in different European countries and got a positive image of Finland from this comparative approach:

*“European Union is not the same with the Iraqi refugees. It's very different. Because Sweden in 2006, it's like Finland now, they accept Iraqi refugees. Now it's very tightened, the rules. So Finland and Belgium, they make it for us – not quite easy, but at that time it was better than other countries.” (A.)*

The encounter with policy regimes regarding the asylum process or family reunification thus began to shape the trajectories of my interview partners even before their arrival. They also usually consulted friends and family members who had already arrived to Europe to ask about the situation in different countries:

*“My friend, he [was] coming before me. Maybe two months or three months. And he told me, go to Finland, search in the Google and see. Search it and see. I google the school – everything is good. The school is number one in the world, I think. And the travelling, number one. And the police and the army is number one. The people is good. Yeah, I want like this country.” (O.)*

*“When I was in my country, I ask about, how is the life, about their children, how are they in the school, how are they with the people of Sweden or Finland, how are their treating the children or treat his family. They told me they are in a good situation. But all situation, I thought, is better than my country.” (K.)*

*“My cousin asked me, when I cross the sea, how can I complete for Europe? And do you know someone in Turkey? What about Finland? What can I find in Finland if I came for Finland? Which is better, Sweden or Finland? Or what do you say if I stay in Austria? And I told him, just leave Iraq now, yes, you won't stay in Baghdad.” (M.)*

Others were relying on the information they received from more anonymous sources such as other refugees on the road, or social media platforms, particularly Facebook:

*“Facebook helped me to leave from Iraq to Europe. But from Europe, that's where I decided to go to Finland, from the people I met, and asking around.” (J.)*

The conversations with the study participants demonstrate that traditional “push-pull models” are

not sufficient or adequate for explaining the movements of refugees, as they neglect the “transformative power” of mobile practices for those on the move (Ernste et al., 2012). While some of the study participants were indeed planning to come to Finland in the first place based on personal interests or because of ideas of favorable asylum policies there at that time, these factors were not too significant regarding their decision to leave Iraq in the first place. Many did not know anything about Finland before they arrived here, or relied solely on hearsay, mainly because they felt they did not have time to look for information en route. Indeed, most of those who spontaneously decided to come to Finland pointed out that they did not have the patience or time to do research on Finland while they were travelling, but engaged with detailed legal processes, customs and the local “culture” mainly after their arrival.

Encounters made on the road were a significant factor in the decision-making process of most of my interview partners. As Hagen-Zanker and Mallett (2016) point out,

destinations often start off as vague, fuzzy ideas of a 'kind of' place, only to solidify as people move through what are quite fragmented and protracted migrations. By the time most people have arrived, they have a much clearer understanding of what drew them there. (p.34).

These encounters are not limited to information exchanges with relatives, other travelers, and in some cases even smugglers, which would influence the further trajectories of the refugees. As their consideration of different national asylum politics already hints at, encounters with regimes of mobility contributed to the mobile practices of my interlocutors, shaping their experience of “becoming” a refugee.

As I tried to show previously, the mobility of refugees is one among many categories in which mobile people are subsumed and which, in that way, controls and regulates the form their movement takes. National and international regimes of mobility and asylum policy are determining factors shaping the trajectories of those on the run; they aim to deter or decoy specific categories of people. For some of my interlocutors, the encounters with those regimes started already back in Iraq, where their personal mobility was often limited due to their (official) categorization or affiliation with a particular sectarian group. Furthermore, the majority of them based their estimation on the allegedly “favorable” chances for asylum status in Finland in relation to the

regulations in other European countries. Even so, for most of the study participants, choosing the route to Finland was not a simple decision before leaving Iraq, but consisted of constant renegotiation of their own trajectory in response to changing situations and personal experiences through encounters with different (yet sometimes overlapping) regimes of mobility.

S., whose family had lived in Finland since 2010 as UNHCR quota refugees, had repeatedly tried to reach Finland by legal means and finally saw the illegal journey to Europe as his last resort:

*“Throughout all those years, I was trying all the legal means and all the legal ways for family reunion. [...] I just couldn't get the approvals. [...] I have appealed, I get rejection, three times, and I have appealed and appealed, three times, until I get to the higher court. And again, they just agree on the immigration's primary decision, which is refusal. So I exhausted all the legal ways and means, and after that, I lost all hope that I can come to Finland in a proper way. They didn't allow me.” (S.)*

S.'s encounter with Finland's legal regime regulating mobility is illustrative for the way in which “illegal” movement of people across borders is not only constructed, but actively expedited by excluding certain groups or individuals from the possibility to be mobile in any way that would be considered “legal”. As Andersson (2014) puts it, this system “feeding on the illegality it is meant to control, only produces more and increasingly distressing forms of it” (p.24). My interview partners' encounters with different mobility regimes also casts light on how the legal and political framing the mobility of people as illegal, at the same time brings about the necessity of those “illegal” activities.

This becomes visible in my interlocutors' encounters with border regimes. The majority of my interview partners followed the so-called “Balkan route”, which, to some extent, has become synonymous with the movement of refugees from the Middle Eastern region aiming for Europe. After crossing the border from Iraq to Turkey, most took a boat organized by human traffickers over the sea to Greece, from where they continued via the Balkan states (Macedonia, Croatia, Serbia, and Hungary) and then via Austria, Germany and finally Sweden or Denmark to Finland. While most of them used public transport such as trains, busses, and ferries for the greater part of their journey, they had to often maneuver on foot, especially in border regions, so as to circumvent border guards and police checks. Public transport was also often overcrowded with other asylum

seekers, who had the same destination or were going in the same general direction, so that some of my interview partners rather relied on slower or more costly alternatives. O. and his family were able to organize a car ride, which took them all the way from Croatia to Finland, and F. travelled all the way from Iraqi Kurdistan to Finland in the back of a truck.

The total time of travelling from Iraq to Finland varied with every individual story and ranged from between two weeks in the shortest to almost three months in the longest case. The massive differences in time were related mostly to rather local situations and phenomena on the road, due to for example the unavailability of boats in Turkey, bad weather conditions, being held up or arrested by police and border guards and in some cases spending time in prison or detention. Sometimes people would also consciously choose longer routes to avoid encounters with police or military forces, or to circumvent rural areas in which network reception and connectivity were underdeveloped or not available at all. The conversations with my interview partners thus confirmed for the most part the findings of Hagen-Zanker and Mallett (2016), who argue that “people do not necessarily travel along the easiest or quickest route, being constrained as they are by border controls, limits on financial and social capital, the actions of smugglers and the extent and reliability of available information” (p.12).

When asked about the most difficult part of their journey, most participants immediately named the time they spent in Turkey as well as their attempts to cross the sea to Greece. Most asserted that they felt under immense time pressure to continue their journey before they would be caught by Turkish police guards, yet they needed time to find a “trustworthy” smuggler to bring them safely to Greece, which was usually rather difficult and required manifold resources. Even though for most of my interview partners, their time in Turkey was characterized by constant active information exchange with other refugees, smugglers, and family members back home, they usually experienced it as a time of waiting and being “stuck”:

*“It takes you one month, [but] it's not one month, it feels like 10 years!” (A.).*

This experience of being confined to a place where they felt they should not linger longer than necessary coincided with the inability to physically pass Turkey's borders, and was even extended beyond its shores; most of the participants drew a distinction between the part of the sea still controlled by the Turkish coast guard (“the shit coast guard”, as J. phrased it) and Greek waters, and

they only felt that they had “escaped” Turkey after crossing the invisible barrier after which the Greek coast guard would be responsible for them. This experience related not only to previous personal or told experiences about the treatment of refugee boats by Turkish officers, but was also tied in with the experience of having reached “Europe” and thus completed the first stage of the journey. The sea thus not only represented a physical barrier on my interlocutors' trajectories, baring the “optimization of natural obstacles” (Gabrielli, 2014, p.319) inherent in the securitization of European borders. The conscious division of the sea into two parts depending on which national military force was responsible for illegal travelers also demonstrates its symbolic meaning as the crossing to more or less “safe” territory, underlining how different national or regional regimes of mobility and asylum policy contribute to the meaning that those on the move assign to a particular place. Indeed, as Gabrielli has argued, the European Union's attempts to externalize border control to adjacent states such as Turkey create a “moving border” that transforms such states into buffer zones meant to filter out the “flow” of migrants before they reach actual European border lines. Resulting in this “outsourcing” of border control to perceived transit states, there is “a shift of migratory paths and patterns in transit spaces towards more dangerous routes, with a parallel increase of risk for migrants' life, as well and the enlargement of the border-crossing market” (Gabrielli, 2014, p.318).

However, even beyond the point of crossing the border to the European Union, the constant change of border regulations within Europe taking place in 2014-16 (Kingsley, 2016) created obstacles and had significant impacts on the trajectories of my interview partners. Experiences of precarity and persecution thus continued to shape their trajectories after safely reaching Greek shores. Many did not know how to continue after crossing the sea, and realized only then that there were still manifold obstacles to be tackled which would require the readjustment of movement and thus cost more time than originally intended. Often, border areas were avoided or widely circumvented because of fear of being imprisoned or sent back by the border guards and police. A. also reported that some policemen he encountered took ransom from him and his friends before letting them pass the border. Many of my interview partners had heard from others about their bad experiences in prisons especially in Hungary and Serbia, so that they tried to avoid contact with the police and border guards whenever possible, and thus took long detours through rural and forestry areas:

*“I don't want to go with the Hungarian people, because I know they don't have any humanitarian rights, laws. Because I've seen – it's on social media, you know – Macedonia also, I see people go to prison.” (H.)*



*“Hungaria is very dangerous. The Hungarian police, if they catch you, they throw you in the prison, three or four years, I don't know.” (K.)*

*“Hungaria was very difficult, because is many police at border, and if they catch us, we'll go to court and to prison, big problem. And will take fingerprint without my accept. And maybe they will hit me and do something bad to me.” (T.)*

The fear of being forced to leave fingerprints or to apply for asylum in another country than their destination, thus ending their journey further and in worse circumstances than they envisioned, further prompted them to stay “invisible” until they had reached what they considered a “better” place to stay:

*“In Austria the Red Cross told us, be careful in Denmark if you want to go to Finland. Because in Denmark, if they catch you, they want to take your fingerprints. And they will force you to stay there.” (M.)*

*“The worst part was in Austria, the smuggler left us on the border. [...]The local people, they take us and they force us to make asylum request. They threaten us, and they're shouting at us, so we're afraid that our journey will not succeed. Because we've taken three days in Austria without any papers, you can't walk, you can't do anything.” (A.)*

Thus, it is not only the physical demarcation of the border that coins the experience of mobility for what is considered to be “illegal” migrants; it is practices of border control that shape encounters with (national) regimes of mobility. In this sense, refugees encounter borders that they cannot circumvent by adjusting their physical route, since they “carry borders on their bodies and their fingertips” (Mountz et al., 2013, p. 532).

At other times, my interview partners were forced to stay in a certain location and wait for several days or weeks, because they were running out of money. T. told how he and his friend

arrived in Germany and stayed there for a couple of months, although it became clear to him rather soon that he did not want to stay there. However, he had to wait for his family back in Iraq to collect and transfer more money to him, so that he could continue his journey towards Finland.

*“The Iraqis that looks for the work or that looks for the residency, they stay in the Germany. To go to Finland, you must have another money. 2000 [euros], I think, from Germany to the Finland. So they stay in Germany.” (AH.)*

Two of my interview partners travelled by plane, which made their situation significantly different from those of the majority. With the help of a smuggler and his contacts, H. was able to book a direct flight from Athens to Helsinki, whereas S. booked several transit flights from Iraq under different names and with a friend’s passport, so that he would not require an entry visa for the transit countries and could switch planes to Europe while pretending to fly to Southeast Asia for a business trip.

As has hopefully become clear in this chapter, experiences of persecution in Iraq, the “decision” to leave for Finland and the spatial trajectories leading there cannot be seen as separate entities. The mobility of “refugees” does not start only at the moment they cross the borders of their birth country, and neither does it end with handing in an asylum application. They move within one country, they are forced or decide to return to their country of birth, they continue their flight to safer places across or within borders, they adapt their strategies of movement responding to changes in policy regulations, they stay connected via social media, and they influence the mobile trajectories of others (cf. Brekke & Brochmann, 2014). Furthermore, I have shown how regimes of mobility create an underlying matrix regulating the movement of people by for instance forcing them to follow certain routes, limiting them to particular localities and modes of travelling, and shaping their experience of their own mobile trajectories. Keeping this background in mind, in the upcoming chapter, I explore in more detail what role ICT played in this encounter with mobility regimes and how technology helped to circumvent and, at other times, enforce the limitations imposed by the mobility regimes encountered in this chapter.

## 6. Technology as a lens

### 6.1 The use of ICT

The importance of smartphones and particularly the access to social media via those devices became apparent during the talks with my interlocutors. All of them listed their smartphone as their most important means of information exchange and communication en route, most of them rating it to be the most important object to bring with them from home. All but one carried their phone with them at all times since leaving Iraq. While most had used smartphones in their everyday life before, others purchased new devices particularly for the purpose of their journey:

*“Before I start my journey, I purchase this iPhone. Because they say it's important for you to take a smartphone, you need the GPS and communication, internet, you have to be quick. Especially in Germany it was very useful, because you have to be quick and not slow down, because back then, in July, it's very tense in Germany, police everywhere.” (A.)*

When I asked why they relied mostly on their smartphones rather than other communication technologies such as regular mobile phones, laptops, or tablets, my interview partners listed the handiness and manageability of the phones as their topmost quality. Smartphones are relatively light weight and can be easily carried around in pockets; they don't take up much space and are quick and easy to use. Furthermore, they offer a wide range of functions that allow their users to access and exchange crucial information from various sources at the same time.

Four main functional categories emerged from the conversations with my interview partners: firstly, the phones were used mainly for navigational purposes such as locating one's position via GPS and forwarding it to family members, other refugees, or aid organizations. Many interviewees pointed out how they used GoogleMaps or similar applications to “define their location” (K.), particularly in peripheral areas, and then update their family members about their whereabouts. This was particularly important in situations where they could not rely on visible landmarks such as street signs, or while crossing the sea from Turkey to Greece:

*“You're asking about how did I use my smartphone? I used it when we moved from Izmir to the land of Greece. I just know where am I, and send it to my family. If there is anything happening to me, they know where to search about me. And I told you, I have many idea of my way. Maybe in the forest, maybe on some high route, or maybe in the cities, villages. So I sometimes use the map of the phone.” (K.)*

Secondly, communication with friends and family members both back home and on the road were handled almost exclusively via internet-based instant messaging and video chat apps, such as Viber, WhatsApp, Line, Facebook Messenger, and Skype. The participants of this study pointed out that using the internet for calls and messaging was more affordable than using up phone credit for costly international calls; additionally, they could usually continue using their previous accounts even after purchasing a new SIM card connected to a new phone number. These apps would also allow them to connect in groups with (potential) informants:

*- H.: “Viber, WhatsApp, we are using groups, we are posting, we are taking advices. Like, 'Okay guys, I'm gonna go with smuggler Ali from Turkey to Greece, how much should I pay?' So it was good to exchange experiences.”*

*- Me: “Those people in the groups, were those people you knew before?”*

*- H: “No no, it's anonymous, we don't know. Just the groups, and then a friend of mine recruits another friend of mine, they recruit me, I recruit other people.”*

*“For example, if I tell another guy, can you go from the right and see if there is police here or not. And another group, you should go on this side. They just see our situation and what will happen. Because we don't move, if we don't know if the road is very safe for us. And when we move, walking, for example one kilometer, after that we take a break and call our friends, and call who can give us helping.” (T.)*

Thus, thirdly, the phones were indispensable for planning the physical route and practicalities of their journey, such as finding information on public transport, accommodation, updates on “safe” routes that were not patrolled by police or border guards, or contact information for smugglers, traffickers, or individuals offering help in different countries:

*“Meeting the smuggler was by Facebook. Finding hotels during the journey was by Facebook. Getting to know where to sleep and what are the roads that should be avoided, because there is maybe danger in this part. They talked literally about everything. There were people posting their whole journeys, you know. Like, in details. Even from Turkey to the Greek island. We would know if the sea is quiet or where to get the boat, from Facebook. The prices of the ticket for the buses. Even how to walk when you get lost or get separated from the group – I have a clear idea if something bad happens, what to do, if I get lost or something, what addresses should I ask for. Everything.” (J.)*

*“Every step I check the social media, the groups, about updates on the roads. Because some people before me, ten hours or 24 hours, they know what thing I will face. So I check it every time.” (A.)*

*“It was the Facebook, the social media, it was the – it was the best website for us, as in Iraqi people. So there was kind of groups and pages in the Facebook, I know groups where there was talking about the smugglers, what's the good things, what's the bad things, which is the countries that can give asylum, the papers.” (H.)*

Lastly, some of my interlocutors reported using their phones for documenting experiences of their journey by taking pictures or videos. T., for instance, had documented his entire journey from Turkey to Greece in pictures, which he sent to me via Facebook after our conversation, showing for instance selfies of him in a life-saving vest, his fellow travelers posing for a group picture in front of a small bonfire in a forest, photos of official and personal documents, and artifacts in a museum in Greece that they visited while waiting for the ferry to the mainland.

In the Facebook groups I observed for this study, users also shared posts about finding friends and language tandem partners, accommodation and goods, tips on how to interact with police and border guards, seeking help in everyday life matters or their asylum application process, venting frustration about the immigration service, sharing stories about racist or xenophobic encounters, but also about people who had helped and assisted them, organizing political

protests, or sharing articles and news pieces concerning the situation in Finland or in their home countries.

While all of my interview partners agreed that those technologies were crucial for them for planning and following through with their journey, as well as for their plan of settling in Finland, they however did not see the role of these technologies as unambiguously beneficial. Indeed, as H. pointed out,

*“[About] the social media, if you ask me, it gives us 10% good things and 90% very bad news – people got stolen their money, smugglers got people stuck in very bad ways, because of social media.” (H.)*

I will thus in the following sections dive deeper into the factors of insecurity that can arise directly from the importance of new digital technologies for the mobility of refugees.

## **6.2 Periphery and materiality**

Particularly with regard to the maintenance of phones, my interlocutors encountered difficulties that directly related to their physical trajectories in often peripheral and remote areas, such as forests, the country side, or across the sea.

My interview partners reported that one of the most common problems with their phones was related to the inability to re-charge the battery on the road, either due to the unavailability of power sources at certain stages of their journey, or because charging the phone would have imposed restriction on their ability to move freely. Fear of police and border guards, limited resources, bad health conditions, as well as the constantly changing political situations in the transit countries required them to move fast and remain constantly mobile, and power sources were not always available at resting places or in situations of unavoidable waiting, for example in camps, during the boat ride on the sea, or while hiding from the police. Most of the study participants sought to circumvent this problem by purchasing an additional, external battery (“power bank”) that allowed them to charge their phones on the go. Not being bound by the availability of power sources on their journey was thus one way to circumvent a precarious absence of crucial information by rendering them less dependent on the availability

of reliable power sources in certain localities.

Several cases of physical damage to or loss of the phones were mentioned during the interviews, which also affected the mobility and trajectories of their owners. Depending on the degree of damage, some or all of the crucial services they relied on during their journey were no longer accessible. This was particularly problematic in peripheral areas without maintenance or replacement opportunities; yet, it was usually in those areas that it was important to access information via the phones, for instance the location of the next possible maintenance point. O., for example, had to leave his phone with his mother in Turkey, so that he and his father could stay in contact with her, and was unable to purchase a replacement device because they were constantly on the move to reach Finland as quickly as possible. In addition, his own financial situation did not allow him to purchase a new device:

*“I don't have phone. In Turkey I have, but I give it to my mother when I left. [...] But my phone is coming. Because one person is coming from Iraq soon, and they told me, I get one for you, because in Iraq is cheaper than in Finland. It's very expensive [here].”*

(O.)

As a result, at the time of the interview, he could not move as freely in Finland as he would have liked or get his own apartment, because he had to stay in close proximity to his father and siblings for lack of means of reaching them.

The limited coverage of cellular networks also imposed territorial restrictions on the otherwise “trans-spatial” functionality of the refugees' phones. While enabling information exchange and communication across spatial and timely distances as well as physical borders, territorial boundaries nevertheless restricted the functionality of the smartphones by limiting network availability to national coverage. Most SIM cards only worked within the closer border region of the respective provider's country of operation. M. recalled that he had to buy eight different SIM cards throughout his entire journey from Iraq to Finland; he also pointed out that he activated a certain data roaming service on his Turkish SIM card so that he would be able to use his phone beyond the Turkish border on the sea route to Greece. T. had similar experiences of disconnection:

*“Between Serbia and when I arrived to Austria, all network between me and my friends*



*is cut. Three or four days that they didn't know anything about me, because there's no internet. I use internet and SIM card in Yunan [Greece], in Macedonia, and it didn't work in Serbia and Croatia and Hungaria.” (T.)*

In rural and peripheral areas, the network coverage was additionally often unstable or at times non-existent; yet especially in those areas, the communication and exchange with other group members was essential for navigational purposes. Messenger services and apps could often not be updated due to insufficient or no internet connection, and slow connectivity could mean unwanted phases of immobility and thus vulnerability:

*“Actually, I didn't even have time to connect to the internet [when I arrived in Helsinki], I just wanted to get out [of the airport], you know, I'm done, I'm here. It would be stupidity to stay there and try to connect and then give them more time to catch you or to notice you or something. Just get out of there.” (S.)*

Therefore, the smartphones as objects of mobility on the one hand enabled the mobility of their users by enabling exchange of crucial information for their navigation, but on the other hand limited their possibilities of where they could go by relying on external structures, which were by tendency weaker in those localities that the refugees as “illegal travelers” had to pass through. For my interview partners, these limitations of connectivity were especially relevant with regard to interrupted navigation, the temporary loss of their virtual eyesight:

*“In every country, I would have to buy the SIM card, a new number and everything. Because, you know, it's necessary. My life depends on it. I know nothing, it's like walking blindly.” (J.)*

*“The first day when I reached Finland, I didn't have connection. The Greek operators, they didn't work in Finland. So when I came to Finland, I was blind.” (H.)*

S. even brought an external GPS tracking device with him, because he felt that he could not rely entirely on his smartphone:

*“[The GPS device] is so small that I can carry it within my luggage, it has long life battery as well. [...] Take the worst-case scenario, someone is chasing me in Amsterdam and I have to run away, and I have to leave the airport premises for a certain point. I need to know my routes.” (S.)*

The metaphor of losing “sight” also hints at how these technologies are embedded in the process of making sense of places. Seeing their physical surroundings “through the eyes” (or, rather, through the lens) of GPS-generated maps on their phones, or receiving information about the “safety” of certain routes and locations via messenger apps and Facebook groups, thus allowed the users to understand and contextualize their current position and thus negotiate the meaning of the location in which they operated. Smartphones are thus immediately involved in the construction of space and the experience of refugees of their own mobility within that space. In this process, the immobile structures referred to in this context are distributed asymmetrically, which can then create zones of “connectivity, centrality, and empowerment” in some localities, and “of disconnection, social exclusion, and inaudibility” in others (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p.210). Yet, as the conversations with my interview partners have demonstrated, it is often precisely those zones that are frequented by what is understood to be “illegal” travelers, thus demonstrating the workings of mobility politics that confine certain groups to localities disenfranchising them not only from certain ways of being “mobile”, but also from the mobility of information. I elaborate on this point in the upcoming section.

## **6.3 Limits of “free” information flows**

### **6.3.1 Information processing skills**

As I have pointed out above, the seemingly free flow of information via new ICT is however limited and regulated within the realms of material design and immobile local structures that regulate the access to information asymmetrically. Just like the spatial movement of people, the flow of information can thus not be entirely detached from the physical space, which is unequally

equipped, and is thus restricted to the aforementioned underlying “grid” of power (Kalir, 2013) that regulates resources allowing or preventing mobility.

However, during the conversations with my interview partners, it became apparent that this asymmetrical access to ICT as a resource of mobility is not limited to the physical access to devices or their physical location. Even when such access is given, the particular information landscapes containing (potentially) useful or necessary information at the same time require certain skill sets for the user to navigate within them. Just like the physical structures granting access to those landscape disadvantage certain individuals and groups according to their physical location (which might be at the same time a deciding factor in categorizing such individuals and groups), the informational landscapes themselves can enable some to be mobile, while confining others to stages of immobility.

Many of my interlocutors pointed out that they considered themselves rather experienced and adept in navigating on social media. As J. pointed out, all of his friends and family members back in Iraq used Facebook. To him, it was a natural environment of information exchange and communication, and thus did not require much adaptation as a medium when used during his flight. He pointed out that he neither had the time nor the patience to get familiar with any new digital interfaces, and that he generally used only those apps and websites during that time with which he was already familiar. Since some of my interview partners had degrees in information science or engineering, they considered themselves rather skilled in operating technology and digital media.

However, not everyone embarking on the dangerous journey to Europe has sufficient experience in operating digital technology as a means of information acquisition (cf. Vernon et al., 2016, p.14). Interview participants repeatedly pointed out how they had to assist others who travelled with them and who were unable to navigate by themselves:

*“I was the one responsible for the technology, like the GPS, and if something bad happens which numbers we should contact.” (J.)*

*“I am boss in the groups, you know? I am hero [laughs]. Because the others don't know anything, just I am talking [with volunteers] and sending location.” (T.)*

Often, they encountered other people on the road who did not know how to read maps, or who could not read Arabic or Latin script. Lack of language skills could also become a problem, when relevant information was only shared in English or another particular language that individuals could not understand (see also Hannides., Bailey, & Kaoukji, 2016).

Even with adequate literacy and language skills, not everyone was able to navigate in the decentralized, uncontrolled, contradictory, and at times downright chaotic flows of information via digital media, particularly on Facebook. According to the participants of this study, wrong information particularly on social media were among the most dangerous aspects of their reliance on new ICT during their journey. Due to the constant changes in situations on the road, border controls, smuggler activities, and asylum regulations in individual countries, information was generally rather short-lived, and every news piece had the potential to time out and thus become obsolete in a matter of hours. At the same time, the pressing need to stay mobile made it more difficult for them to validate and verify certain pieces of information. The verisimilitude of information on social media, as well as the already mentioned decentralized, individual user-based system of information exchange furthermore fostered the sharing of individual experiences, which were often biased and thus not applicable to everyone:

*“I always advise most of my friends who wanted to reach here, do not listen to what's written in Facebook. The reason why: everyone expresses his personal experience. And if he's successful, he would make it like heaven, and if he's a failure due to so many reasons, he would say it's the worst route, don't do it.” (S.)*

This unstable, constantly changing information landscape on social media provided a flourishing environment for rumors. Wrong information and questionable advice were often spread unintentionally because it had worked for some people in certain circumstances, such as the alleged “trustworthiness” of a certain smuggler or the “safety” of a particular route. Sometimes, rumors were simply believed to be true out of sheer desperation, or because people were unable to differentiate between false advertisement and genuine advice. S. remembered how, at some point, the Facebook groups he followed were overflowing with the rumor of asylum seekers being eligible to receive a free apartment and several thousand euros per month for nothing in Finland:

*“Rumors always add impact. Especially amongst those illiterate or you know, those – shallow-minded, I would say. And there are a lot of them. It looks odd to us, how can a person believe in such thing? But the reality says, there are people who believe that.”*  
(S.)

Wrong information was, however, also often spread purposefully. Smugglers made use of the general disorganization of information and the resulting difficulties to verify their trustworthiness by advertising their “services” on Facebook. The majority of the participants of this study pointed out that finding a smuggler to take them across the sea from Turkey was the most difficult part of their journey, because they could not rely on the word of anyone who claimed to have had positive experience with individual smugglers:

*“[The smuggler] told me, he can get me out without passport. [ironically] Yeah, right. And he was confident, 'I have many friends, I have powerful contacts...' So I was like, bullshit. Same on Facebook. 'Pay 100\$ and go to Greece!' And he just comes and takes 100\$ and you don't see this man again. And these things, it's very hard to make a difference if they are genuine or fake.”* (H.)

*“I cannot trust the Facebook. I trust my friend, because he's going with him [the smuggler]. I don't trust the Facebook and the numbers, because I don't know who's the person and how I can go. [...] You don't know who's the [smuggler], maybe many people die with him [...] I want to phone the person – is test, so many people test him, tried him. I don't go with people I don't know. That's not possible.”* (O.)

According to Brown, Broderick and Lee (2007), the credibility of an anonymous source online is usually evaluated by other users according to the perceived expertise of the source, as well as potential source biases (p.6). Thus, the mere exposure to information is not necessarily enough to shape physical mobile trajectories of people; the evaluation of the information source as trustworthy or not decides whether trajectories are influenced positively (if advice is followed because it is deemed trustworthy), negatively (if advice is ignored, or the opposite is done consciously when the source of information is considered untrustworthy),

or not at all by the provided piece of information. For many, it was important to meet up with smugglers in person or to at least have a phone call rather than communicating solely via written messages, because the evaluation of the expertise and possible bias of the informant could not be verified on purely text-based information exchange online (cf. Brown et al., 2007).

Another wide-spread problem was the disorganization of information, especially on social media platforms. S. pointed out one Facebook group run by volunteers who were based in Turkey and assisted refugees with crossing the sea between Turkey and Greece. He estimated the group to be one of the most valuable sources of information for refugees on the journey. The decentralized structure of the group, where everyone could post experiences and updates about their journeys in real-time, was at the same time however one of its biggest weaknesses:

*“This Facebook group, it was a mix – it was not specialized, or a professional one. You can find songs in between, you can find love stories in between, poetry, or football games. So I talked to [the admin] and said 'Look, you have one of the most important and essential life-saving sites. You should not mix it up with all those entertainment things, you should keep it professional and to the point.' He said, 'No, it's freedom of speech, and I do not shush all those people, I let them speak whatever they want.' And I said, 'Hey, I want to look for a specific boat, I want to follow that, what happened with this one, I will be lost with all this humble-jumble in between!’” (S.)*

Similar discussions were a frequent occurrence also in the Facebook groups I observed in the course of this research. Admins or other users would often question the relevancy or appropriateness of certain types of posts, such as memes or, in one case, an hour-long video recording of a group of young men having barbecue on a beach in Helsinki, and regularly the original posters would refer to their right to speak freely as the justification for such posts.

As a consequence, my interview partners repeatedly mentioned the dilemma they found themselves in when using social media to obtain information. On the one hand, the vast resources shared specifically on Facebook allowed them to compare and verify pieces of information; many pointed out that they had to rely on Facebook as their main source of information, as they received timely updates and detailed responses to questions. On the other hand, the anonymity of internet social

media platforms facilitated the spread of wrong and thus at times precarious information:

*“There was other groups – all bad things, all fake news, if you come from Iraq and you go to Germany, you get direct asylum, something – they talk about things that real asylum seekers, or the men persecuted in this country, aren't really looking for. We want [...] the real man who's talking, what's the real talk, the real news. Because everybody can post on Facebook, it's free for all. Everyone can change his name and can just come up with a story.” (H.)*

The decentralized structure of Facebook groups allowed information to flow in real time (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014), while at the same time requiring advanced information skills to disentangle an unfiltered, overflowing chaos of stories and to separate pieces of information, both relevant and irrelevant, which could be rather time-consuming. Additionally, those without adequate skills to find, understand, and assess important and relevant information because of the lack of what Lloyd et al. (2013) have termed “information literacy” - or, with Alam and Imran (2015), “digital literacy” - might wind up in precarious situations that might compromise their plans for mobility:

*“For me, I don't believe the people – anyone who's educated, they don't just believe the words, let's see some actions, let's see some guarantees! [...] But in this world, there is no guarantees.” (H.)*

### **6.3.2 Actualizing information**

Apart from the problem of sharing, accessing, understanding, and verifying relevant information, another issue for my interlocutors was the ability to put this information into action. Many of my interview partners had saved the numbers of both the Turkish and the Greek coast guards in their phone when crossing the Aegean Sea, in case they would get in distress at sea and needed rescue. However, coast guard officials were often unresponsive or unwilling to cooperate when receiving emergency calls, especially when the refugees did not speak any Turkish or English. T. had to rely entirely on social media to account for his lack of language skills during his voyage across the sea:



*“We have guys, a voluntary group in Turkey, and when the refugees go to sea, they will connect between the groups and refugees. For example, if we drowned, I will just define my location in sea, and I will send my location on WhatsApp or Facebook to the groups. And the groups will tell the police or coast guard. Because the groups know the number for the coast guard, and talk with them Turkish language, because Turkish [are] – very selfish about language. Not want to speak English, you know?” (T.)*

While Turkish police and coast guard officers were often unable or unwilling to communicate in English, most of the refugees did not speak any Turkish and were thus unable to explain their situation of emergency. Indeed, some of my interview partners told how officers of the Turkish coast guard pretended not to understand their calls for help, even though it was clear to my interviewees that they in fact did. In other cases, my interlocutors reported how officers actively punctured their boat and left them at sea to drown after they had refused to return to the Turkish shore.

This dynamic bares the unequal power structures involved in what I would call in reference to Lemos (2010) to “actualize” information. While the involvement of ICT makes it possible for the refugees to determine their own position and contact the responsible authorities directly in the case of emergency, rather than drifting helplessly at sea, they are in many cases still bound to operating through an intermediary in the form of an aid organization or other volunteers with more leverage over authorities. While individuals can theoretically retrieve and convey information about their situation, it is often rather unlikely that the coast guard will act on this information, because there is no way for the refugees to enforce a reaction, whereas the involvement of a third party – the voluntary group – alters the power balance between the agents of the border regime and the “illegal” travelers at sea.

In a similar case, J. reported how he and his group of friends ended up in police confinement in a town in Germany, which, after a quick consultation with an aid organization via WhatsApp, turned out to be unfounded. However, despite being able to access information about their rights to leave the confinement, it was not without the help of a befriended aid worker present at the scenery that they could continue their journey. Thus, while ICT in some cases add a degree of “independence” to the movement of refugees, they still do not take them out of the underlying regimes of unequally distributed power. Even where flows of information become immediate and “decentralized” through the involvement of ICT, the engagement with and consequences following from this flow is still

embedded in particular grids of power that provide leverage to certain actors of regimes of mobility, yet do not necessarily empower those at the margins.

In fact, it would seem that sometimes the free flow of information via digital media has the potential to actually strengthen the agenda of particular regimes aiming to control certain migratory movements. As pointed out before, the constantly and quickly changing border and asylum policies in European countries during the peak of recent refugee movements brought about the problem of old and obsolete information, meaning previously true and useful information rendered useless or even dangerous only a short time later. While ICT in part addressed this problem by providing the opportunity for timely and relatively up-to-date information exchange, not even the fast-paced information exchange on social media platforms could always do justice to the ever-changing situations en route that refugees were about to face. Indeed, at some points, the reliance on social media even exacerbated the risk to fall for obsolete pieces of information. Changing situations usually brought about a flood of contradictory and confusing comments, thus making it harder to differentiate between actual updates and mere recollections of previously safe and open routes according to personal experiences of other users. Even those who had left only a couple of weeks or months before could not provide up-to-date information on the current situation at borders, blocked routes, or the asylum process in certain countries:

*“I have some friends, they left Iraq before me. [...] So I called them, how can I cross that countries to arrive to Finland? [...] 'Just cross the sea, and everything will be easy.' They always told me, cross the sea, cross the sea, so I imagined it would be really easy for me – it wasn't.” (M.)*

*“So when we crossed the sea, I called my friend and I told him, I'm in Greece now, and I got nothing. What now? And they told me – we don't know... you have to go for the Macedonian border. How? How can I do it?” (A.)*

Not only did this invalidity of old information have the potential to guide refugees into dangerous situations, for example by leading them to formerly safe routes that turned out to be inaccessible or surveilled, recommending smugglers that ended up as “frauds”, or advising them to take certain steps in the asylum process that were no longer legally correct, it could

also significantly delay their journey by requiring them to double-check formerly trusted sources, or rely on information provided by strangers on social media, which required either blind leaps of faith or more time to verify pieces of information – time in which the situation en route, again, could significantly change. Thus, the free and uncontrolled flow of information, while providing benefits in delivering a wider spectrum of information and sources from which to pick according to personal trajectories, also carried the danger of reinforcing the system of inequality inherent in the system of illegalized refugee mobility – a system of “illegality industry” (Andersson, 2014) – by drowning out “useful” pieces of information, thus factually benefitting those with a higher leverage of power.

The absurd situation of having to operate in a system that benefits some by making use of the dire situation of others, who nonetheless depend on this kind of system, is illustrated by S. and H. Albeit profiting themselves from the extensive information exchange on social media for their own journey to Finland, both of them were rather hesitant to share their experiences with others aiming for the same destination:

*“People started to call me when I was in Finland, 'how did you go?'. But I won't give information, I didn't tell, actually. Why? Well, first of all, it's illegal. Second thing, I don't want people to spend that much money. [...] Because I don't want to be a part of it, you know. Because it's happened, maybe [the smuggler] will steal the money, and then it's like 'H. gave me his number!'.” (H.)*

*“I will not help others to take this route, because I can't really assure that if they wanna do it for a good reason, or if they are really clean and good people. Because this route, or this loop which I used, it can be used by bad people as well. Which I do not encourage at any cost. [...] You know, if someone had followed my steps and couldn't make it and failed, he would say, 'Ah, S., he cheated me! He made me get caught, by giving me false advice! [...] So S. is a cruel person.’” (S.)*

This hesitation to perpetuate a system that they themselves profited from stems from the awareness that, despite having achieved a personal gain in reaching Finland, S. and H. still had the feeling of getting “the shorter end of the stick”. They were aware that the information networks of refugees

facilitated by digital media mostly benefited certain actors, particularly smugglers, pushing those relying on the smuggling system to circumvent the restrictions set by legal regimes of migration control. At the same time, this hesitancy was also rooted in the fear of exposure, as I elaborate in the upcoming section.

## **6.4 Online and offline trajectories**

The seeming inconsistency of my interview partners profiting from systems of information exchange benefitting the “illegal” migration of asylum seekers to Finland, but their simultaneous reluctance to provide advice or information about their own journey, can be further explained by examining the issue of merging online and offline trajectories with digital technologies and media as the nexus point.

Many of the interview participants pointed out that, while they would rely almost exclusively on information provided by others on social media, none of them would share their own stories with others online. Most of them did not use their real name on Facebook, and some did not upload a profile picture with visible facial features, as they were concerned about their own safety as well the safety of their families back in Iraq:

*“For some reason I try to be anonymous. A lot of people in my life don't even know that I'm away and that I'm not in Iraq anymore. So that's why I'm not trying to say anything on Facebook.” (J.)*

*“You mean if I posted or shared [on social media]? No, I don't. Because I said, I don't want them to know I travel from Iraq. Because maybe they go after my life, my wife's life... I don't post anything. And [just] my special friends know that I'm travelling from Iraq.” (K.)*

As I showed in the previous section, this hesitation to participate as informants in a system of illegality is partly rooted in the recognition that such systems mainly benefit at best questionable actors such as smugglers. However, it can also be seen as a symptom of the blurring boundaries

between virtual and spatial trajectories, because digital practices have the potential to reveal the “physical” whereabouts of the users. An example of this sort of precarity is the story of S., who had travelled to Finland by plane. During one of his transit stops, he logged into the free Wifi at a big European airport between flights, unaware that the log in process would produce an automatic status update on his Facebook wall:

*“I literally posted that I am in [Europe]. The guys who saw that I was in [Europe] at that point, they were really shocked. And big questions – how did you do it, where are you, how could you travel, how you made it? [...] I shouldn't have done that stupidity. Thinking that it's my personal account and not much people would follow it. [...] I lost a lot of family members, because in a way I opened a secret that I shouldn't tell anyone.”*

(S.)

Similarly, H. attracted attention on Facebook after changing his place of residence on his Facebook profile to Finland:

*“I changed my place of living. So they were like 'Ah, how did you reach Finland?' Last year, there was carnival of Helsinki, so I post photos and they will start commenting, 'How did you get here?'”* (H.)

Information shared via ICT in this context could become dangerous in compromising the anonymity of its users in the face of threats such as militia or the government in their home country, but also with regard to friends and family back home. S.' and H.'s cases thus demonstrate the manifold aspects of precarity caused by the lack of control over the virtual trajectories refugees leave behind through online activity. They did not have control over the reception of their status updates among friends and acquaintances back home, and they lacked full control of the exact audience that had witnessed those updates and thus gained knowledge of their whereabouts and further intentions. This did not only endanger them and their families, but led to them to being perceived as potential informants for others in a system of information exchange of which they did not want to be a part. Thus, while ICT and especially social media enabled access to vast information due to the extension of personal networks, they were also a threat by extending those network ties beyond the immediate

control of the individual, making information about personal mobility accessible to an audience that was hard to oversee.

The danger of potentially unfavorable actors being able to track their physical location and movement with the help of their online activities was not lost on the majority of my interview partners. While most of them documented their journey by taking pictures or video clips with their phones, they posted them (if they did post them at all) only after arriving in Finland, when they felt “safe”:

*“We took photos by my phone, in Turkey and Greece. But I posted them all in Finland. Not in Greece, not in Turkey, because I don't know, in Finland we are much safer. The militias cannot reach us in this place.” (H.)*

H. even deleted his first Facebook account after arriving in Turkey, because he was worried that Turkish authorities might track him down based on his social media activity. Similarly, some of the refugees were careful not to reveal their intentions or whereabouts to the police or government of the countries they passed during their journey:

*“We're using Line to contact others. Because it's more safe, more secure than WhatsApp and Viber, because the Turkish government has – you know, it's kind of rumors, that they have access to Viber. But still there's people here in Finland, when I call them, [they say] 'Don't call me on Viber, the government will recognize!'.” (T.)*

Others, such as AH., were convinced that messenger services like Viber and WhatsApp were generally safer than sending messages via cell networks, which is why he refrained from using text message and regular phone calls altogether. S., who travelled under a false name and passport, also told that he formatted all electronic devices he took with him, so that officials could not find any data that would reveal his actual identity.

Another example of revealing and therefore dangerous information is the story of M., who became

a 'celebrity' on the internet without his knowledge:

*“I have some videos from my last trip. [...] Because there was some French press sitting on our boat. And we didn't know about that. They made a report about that. They even put it on YouTube. [...] When I arrived for Serbia, I made some friends in Serbia, and they told me that 'We saw you on television!'” (M.)*

M.'s case demonstrates the dangers of uncontrolled flow of information shared by others. His face was revealed both on French television, a 'traditional' media outlet, and on a social media platform online. There was no way for him to limit or even track the audience of those broadcasts; his own efforts of staying anonymous and invisible on his physical journey were compromised by external actors, who revealed his locations and movement online and thus in effect deprived him of the control over his own information.

Thus, the online practices of refugees have the potential to reveal information about their physical trajectories. Social media activity can render users vulnerable in providing clues towards their physical location or movement, which can cause some unpleasant repercussions for them. Most of the interview participants tried to leave as few traces online as possible, by not posting anything on social media and limiting their online interactions especially with weaker network ties or strangers to a necessary minimum. Only after arriving in Europe or in some cases Finland, in locations that they felt “safe”, did they upload and post material that would allow others to retrace their physical journey from Iraq. Some of them would also try to avoid certain apps or platforms altogether, for fear of surveillance of their conversations. Most were also rather cautious not to leave digital traces hinting at their physical trajectories, for example by asking too specific questions on Facebook; yet, they could not entirely avoid using digital technologies for communication purpose, as shown above.

The assistance they needed, such as in organizing a smuggler or finding a safe route from their current location, at times required them to reveal details about their current situation as well as their future plans of movement, rendering them vulnerable in the case that information would fall into the wrong hands. Refugees making use of digital technology and social media in particular thus often have to deal with the risk that their “offline trajectories”, or their physical journey between and through certain localities coincide with their “online



trajectories” by becoming a “digitalized” piece of information, whose flow is almost beyond their immediate control.

At the same time, their “offline” practices of mobility were often influenced by their online activities. As I have shown before, browsing Facebook groups for refugees, online research about countries of destination, and the exchange of experiences with other users – often immediately determined the directions their physical movement would take. Decisions concerning the next direction and final destination of individual journeys were often made spontaneously en route, based on information received from at times anonymous sources online. Many decided to apply for asylum in Finland based on information they received from fellow refugees en route, or from posts on Facebook or in groups on messenger apps, so that their online activities and “trajectories” directly impacted on their physical movement. At other times, they would avoid certain areas, countries, or means of transportation entirely due to mistrusting sources advertising them in what they considered to be an untrustworthy manner. Thus, my interlocutors’ “online” and “offline” practices of mobility are entangled in the sense that their navigation in virtual information landscape not only determined how they perceived their physical surroundings or trajectories as “safe” or “unsafe”, but also how this evaluation of locations and places had reciprocal influence on their activities in online spaces. Therefore, the merging of virtual and physical trajectories in ICT, while at times helping them to avoid agents of mobility-containing regimes of power by providing information about alternative “safe” routes, can also render them more vulnerable to surveillance by those very agents.

## **6.5 Appropriating images of “refugeeness”**

Two of my interview partners used their smartphones and other electronical devices to keep up the appearance of not travelling as a refugee, but as a tourist or business traveler and thus not reveal themselves to border guards and the police. S., who reached Finland via plane, wore a suit and tie and carried two phones, his iPad, and a laptop to appear like a wealthy business traveler rather than a refugee and thus escape additional security checks:

*“I came literally wearing a suit, with the original IDs of my profession [...], which helped me a lot of keeping the posture of being a business man or executive. Having a*

*laptop and all. You know, the one which you drag behind you, that kind of suitcase I had. So, the image I presented: presentable, executive level, of a traveler.” (S.)*

Similarly, T., who took the ferry from Sweden to Finland, plugged his headphones into his smartphone and adjusted his clothing style so as to counter the image of the “typical” asylum seeker and look more like a tourist:

*“It was two persons with me in the steam ship, same my situation. When we arrived to harbor in Turku, the police caught the other guys, but don't catch me, because I was wearing shorts, and I put headphones [laughs]. I made myself same like other guys.”*  
(T.)

As their examples show, the use of ICT can impact on the mobile trajectories of refugees by contributing to their representational frame in public and political discourse, while at the same time having the potential to appropriate such images. Technological objects can directly enable mobility by their mere materiality, revealing 'refugee-ness' itself as a performative act. The technological devices T and S. brought with them, as well as the (performed) use of those devices, set a context for observers perpetrating the “visual image of the refugee” (Malkki 1996, p.384). The phones, laptop, iPads, and headphones served as props in an act of performance to circumvent interpretive ascriptions to their bodies and physical appearance.

Visual images of “refugees” as presented in representative regimes such as mainstream media are often restrictive in their imaginations of what refugees should look like and what they should and should not be doing, as well as how and where they should move. Recently, technology and especially the image of the “smartphone refugee” have contributed to this public imagination. Indeed, even with regard to their relation towards technology, the common imagery present on the media shows refugees on boats or in detention centers staring at their phones with stern faces, usually accompanied by a caption pointing out how technology has become indispensable for the mere survival of refugees on the road (see chapter 1). As Malkki (1996) has pointed out,

The visual conventions for representing refugees and the language of raw human needs

both have the effect of construing refugees as a bare humanity – even as a merely biological or demographic presence. (p.390)

S. was making use of this picture by consciously compromising it; “the refugee” in global media imagery uses technology as a means to counter danger and threats and to contact his family, not for working purposes. Similarly, T. and his use of headphones on the boat from Stockholm to Finland appropriated this public image of what a refugee should look like by using technologic devices for entertainment purposes, something that is not envisaged by common representation of refugees using technology for bare survival purposes.

S.'s and T.'s awareness and ironic misuse of the public visual image of refugees with the help of technology – one of the components in the creation of current refugee imagery – allowed them to deter attention and enabled them to move freely without being “recognized” and categorized by authorities and security personnel. ICT thus, in their role as “objects of mobility” that are themselves physically mobile and accompany the mobile bodies of people become part of those processes of inscription of meaning on the corporeal. In the cases of S. and T., this corporeal representation contradicting the image of what constitutes “refugeeness” rooted in an understanding of specific “refugee trajectories” could be appropriated to create an alternative narrative of their journey, which in turn allowed them to follow the physical trajectory they had planned for themselves.

## **7. Power grids**

Discussing the stories and experiences of my interview partners in the previous chapters, I have shown how digital technologies impact on the ability of refugees to navigate within underlying “grids of power” (Kalir, 2013) that aim to categorize, contain, and regulate their mobile practices. As the encounters with regimes of mobility explored through the technology lens in the previous chapter have, however, shown, the role of ICT is rather ambiguous in transcending certain asymmetrical structures of power, while being limited by others, which they at times even seem to reinforce or at least emphasize those inequalities to a certain degree. In the following, I conclude these explorations by summing up this impact of ICT on the mobile practices of refugees and mapping out how technologies are therefore embedded in regimes of mobility.

### **7.1 Making sense of space**

As I have elaborated in the previous chapter, for most of my interlocutors, maps and GPS apps were among the most crucial functions of their smartphones. All of them were tracking their movement or position with GoogleMaps or similar applications, which would help them to plan their further journey. They would also serve to express the current “status” of their trajectory to their family members back home by sending screenshots of their current location. This activity of determining and making sense of one's own location required the involvement of digital technology as a medium to acquire and make sense of information about these locations. At the same time, this process of negotiating the meaning of space reveals how the refugees' smartphones as “objects of mobility” (Horst & Taylor, 2014) and the mobility of information they enable in the interaction with a particular physical location intersect with the mobile experience of their users. ICT become “pocket technoscapes” (I. Richardson, 2007), adding a material dimension by serving as artefacts of performance, contributing to the corporeal reality of experiencing and practicing mobility.

More concretely, “what” the users of locative media in general and the refugees determining their position on a virtual map were tracking was not as such the physical location of their own body, but rather the location of their phones, from which they as the users would infer their own position as travelling with the phone (cf. Sheller & Urry, 2006). Phones as objects of mobility thus contribute to the users' corporeal experience of location by adding layers of functionality to those locations, which determine how users constitute and how they ascribe meaning to certain “places” (cf. Lemos, 2010). My interview partners referred to a metaphorical “blindness” in locations and situations when they were not able to make use of the locating functions of their digital devices; they needed

the locative functions of GPS apps and maps to “see” their surroundings and thus contextualize their own movement within those surroundings. Technology here provided a lens to perceive locations through a form of “augmented reality” and make sense of where my interlocutors were and what this meant for their further movement. Depending on this information, they would often also evaluate whether their current location could be considered safe, if there were hiding places, accommodations, or supermarkets nearby to stock up on their resources, or if they were walking in a border region or crossing non-demarcated border lines, thus entering into another national policy regime that might, as in the cases of Turkey and Hungary, make a significant difference for their experience of being mobile as an “asylum seeker”.

Thus, the involvement of ICT transformed mere spatial locations to places with meaning (Lemos, 2010), which affected my interlocutors experience of mobility in these places. The “link between space and information” (De Souza e Silva & Sutko, 2011, p.25) that the use of ICT can provide is therefore elementary for the refugee travelers' experience of their own mobility through a “made” space. In practice, this could mean that individual users adapted their online activities to their current physical location, for example by refraining from posting status updates in locations that they experienced through the lens of ICT as “unsafe”. Thus, the corporeal experience of mobility cannot be disconnected from the use of technological artefacts, since the “mediatropic” body as a “material-semiotic assemblage with constantly shifting boundaries” (I. Richardson, 2007, p.206) negotiates its experience of location through the use of locative media. The “virtual” is therefore “a genuine site of human activity supported by crafted artefacts” (Nardi, 2015, p.19).

ICT and the “informational territories” (Lemos, 2010) they create as functional layers of locations participating in the making of places demonstrate how the mobilities of people and material objects as well as information in the form of digital data are intertwined. It is at this intersection of different layers of mobility flows that the meaning of places is constituted, by negotiating different functional layers inherent to certain spatial locations that enable those interconnected flows. Thus, in this sense, digital devices such as phones can serve as “space-adjusting” technologies (Harney, 2013, p.542).

However, the downside of this intersection of the mobility of people, (digital) objects, and the information with ICT as the nexus becomes apparent in the question of possible surveillance. Particularly in the case of forcefully displaced people, whose mobility is embedded in the context of persecution and threat of violence, the possibility for agents of a system, which perceives their mobility across national borders as a “threat” (Gabrielli, 2014), to infer on locations and spatial movement from observing their online activities and “track” the mobility of their digital devices is a

precarious side-effect of locative digital technologies. My interlocutors thus usually tended to be careful not to have their physical location revealed by the possibility by their “online” activity, so as not to have others interfere with their movement. Yet, as the example of S. and his accidental post about his whereabouts at the airport reveal,

tensions in information territories are controlled by CCTV, passwords, profiles, tracking surveillance, and so on. Thus, informational territories reflect new dimensions of territoriality, new relations of power and new social practices in contemporary society. (Lemos, 2010, p.410)

Thus, ICT occupy an ambiguous role in the mobility of “illegal” travelers by being embedded in a system of unequal power relations with the refugee on the short end, while at the same time providing under given circumstances the chance to (at least temporarily) circumvent such structures of power by allowing them to try and bypass instruments of migration control such as border check points. With the involvement of technology as an “empowering” instrument for those whose mobility is to be controlled and contained, regimes of mobility can however make use of their leverage by implementing new strategies of (territorial) control, fully aware that the mobility of information is inherently intersecting with the mobility of people. Based on the experiences of mobility as recounted by my interlocutors, I would therefore argue that ICT are significantly involved in the negotiation of the meaning of “space”, with this negotiation following unequal structures of power rather than being set in an equal environment. The character of digital technology as locative media, whose functionality is bound to interactions with physical locations can be employed as an interpretative lens to understand how those technologies frame encounters of their refugee users with mobility regimes of power. One of the main conclusions of this research is thus that refugees, precisely because of their framing within hegemonic social, legal, and political regimes of discourse as “illegal immigrants”, end up in locations and on trajectories that serve to marginalize them. Marginalization and the inequality of power inherent in those regimes of definition manifest themselves in this case through the regulation of *connectivity*.

## **7.2 Connectivity as a tool of power**

As shown before, camps or detention centers, tend to confine refugees within a limited territory that

is often scarce of mobile information infrastructure, which in turn makes it difficult for those confined there to obtain information on how to leave again (Mountz et al., 2013). Refugees in camps, or even in peripheral or other “disconnected” localities often face difficulties of staying connected because of network congestion (Maitland & Xu, 2016), lack of opportunities to re-charge phone balance, or the lack of opportunities to charge batteries, as shown in the conversations with my interview partners. Their enforced physical immobility in those cases also limits the flow or mobility of information, demonstrating again how layers of mobility are interconnected with digital devices such as phones as “objects of mobility” at their nexus. Similarly, the interruption of connection with family, friends, and legal advocates serves as a means to isolate the migrant body in detention, thus controlling their mobility both on a social and physical level (Mountz et al., 2013).

In the case of refugee mobility, controlling the physical structures in a certain location, even in such where control over the spatial mobility of people is not immediately possible, can determine the “flow” of information, which (as we have seen) is essential for the refugees to circumvent other mechanisms of power such as border controls or detention (see also Leung, 2010). Inaccessibility of information flows in such “non-places” (Diken, 2008) has the potential to create a catch-22 situation in which the physical and social mobility of people is limited because of the interrupted virtual mobility of information and/or capital. As a result, their imposed physical immobility might get them “stuck” in certain places without the means to re-establish those virtual connections necessary for them to continue their journey (Mountz et al., 2013). Thus, the “significance of territory [and] of governmental powers that are based in territory” (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013, p.191) become visible in the in the boundaries of nation states expressed by borders and the regimes of power (passport regimes, visa regimes etc.) they encompass and how they define the space in which the movement of those defined as “illegal” in this system is shifted to certain localities.

The physical restrictions of corporeal mobility are often inseparably intertwined with the capability of people to stay mobile on a virtual level, which in turn is crucial for them to stay socially mobile through the maintenance and transformation of network ties (see also Mason, 2011). This confirms the findings of Vernon et al. (2016), who argue that refugees are particularly affected by unaffordability of digital technology due to “factors such as the very factor of their displacement or by government restrictions on their right to move freely from place to place” (p.13).

Asymmetrical structures in space lay the ground to the materiality of ICT by reshuffling the power relations in the negotiations of the “functional layers” of place making described above.



### **7.3 Networks as a mobility resource**

The heightened involvement of ICTs in the mobility practices of refugees implies that mobile technologies and the mobile information landscapes they create are a significant resource enabling mobility also for their users. However, like other resources, their availability and accessibility are linked to social and economic factors, so that certain groups of people become potentially marginalized. Following Alam and Imran (2015), the three levels of a “digital divide” among refugee groups concern the physical access to digital technologies, the willingness and choice to use those technologies, and the (lack of) of adequate information processing skills (p.346f).

Physical access to digital devices and consequently to the information and communication services they enable is limited by several factors for refugees on the road. The affordance of digital devices and smartphones in particular is highly dependent on the socio-economic situation of individuals and certain groups among the refugee population. Those without the financial means of purchasing or maintaining phones (repairing faulty hardware or replacing defective devices, or buying and charging multiple SIM cards in every new country), usually have to rely on second-hand information passed on from those with access to the platforms where the information was shared originally, without any chances for further inquiry or contacting individual informants directly. They are also excluded from the snowball sampling efforts to form peer support groups online, as for instance the WhatsApp groups described by H. Many refugees also rely on flows of financial capital from their relatives in order to continue their journey (such as T., who got temporarily stranded in Germany because he had to wait for additional money sent from Iraq), which is difficult if not impossible to manage without access to digital technology. Therefore, those refugees with wider communication networks can be more resilient to potentially dangerous lack of information or purposefully or accidentally spread misinformation (Hannides, Bailey, & Kaoukji, 2016).

Even when direct access to digital media is given, users are not necessarily able to extract and evaluate those snippets that might be relevant for their own plans and experiences. The decentralized system of content production and sharing on social media leads, as I have shown above, to a flood of information that is often disorganized, so that users need to be able to filter significant from insignificant posts, scroll past news pieces that are irrelevant for them, allow or deny direct contact with other users, and determine whether the source of some seemingly relevant information can be considered trustworthy.

As Dekker and Engbersen (2014) have pointed out, the diversification of network ties and

especially the strengthening of formerly weak or latent bonds via online communication is a key feature of contemporary online social media platforms. While ICT offer the possibility to maintain pre-existing strong network ties with close contacts such as family members and friends even over growing spatial distances, they also enable the intensification of previously “weak” ties like loose acquaintances or distant relatives (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). The diversification of personal network ties is a direct consequence of social media facilitating “niche-based” (Lemos, 2010, p.404) or “consumption-related” (Brown et al., 2007) networks transcending immediate personal contacts, which allows the flow of information past more centralized outlets such as “traditional” media or on-ground state forces or aid workers.

However, the previous chapter revealed that while in some cases this decentralized structure of information exchange via digital technology and media potentially increased the autonomy of those able to operate in the respective information landscapes, the mere movement of information itself did not guarantee the ability to act on this very information. The aforementioned example of T. and his experiences with the Turkish coast guard demonstrate how underlying structures of power designed and perpetuated by mobility regimes (border control, aid regimes, European asylum policy) determine who can act on information. The “actualization” (Lemos, 2010) of such information is not equally accessible for everyone involved in such regimes, so that mobility cannot be understood as “the only route between two points or access to certain punctual information, but a dimension in power and potential power” (p.413).

Thus, Cresswell's argument that practices of mobility are regulated by power relations does not exclude digital practices of mobility; hence, “mobility is a resource that is differentially accessed” (Cresswell, 2010a, p.21). As Lindgren (2013) has argued in his paper on the role of Twitter for the “Arab spring”-uprisings in Libya in 2011, for which social media was perceived to be one of the driving forces, the “democratizing effect” of those media is actually embedded in a tension field “between emancipation and repression”, because underlying structures of power do not exceed the “flat” exchange of information between users. In this sense, it is also important to note that most of the digital communication also in this research took place on cooperate platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, because they were familiar to most and thus provided the possibilities for the widest expansion of networks with as many other users as possible. It was much more likely for my interlocutors to find people on Facebook, because, as J. pointed out “literally everyone is there”. Thus, communication on certain media, technologies, and platforms is additionally channeled along

lines of networking, where the leverage lies with already established, capital-accumulating companies and service-providers (Fuchs, 2011).

## 8. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have shed some light on the mobile practices of refugees. In the light of recent debates about a new generation of “smartphone refugees”, as well as the tendency in mobility studies to focus on practices of mobility and their embeddedness in bigger structures of inequality, I have sought to understand, firstly, how forcefully displaced mobile people framed as “refugees” or “illegal immigrants” encounter those unequal structures during their movement, and secondly, how the involvement of mobile digital technology can be used as a lens to observe these encounters. Lastly, I have explored in what way the use of such technology impacts on the mobile trajectories of those using and travelling with them.

My findings have shown that digital technologies occupy an ambiguous role for the mobile practices of their refugee users. On the one hand, they can help them circumvent particular structures of power by decentralizing the “flow” of information and thus potentially flattening hierarchies of information exchange (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). They can help their users in some cases to circumvent encounters with particular agents and components of regimes interested in restricting their mobility by providing information about localities. ICT as “locative media” (de Souza e Silva & Sutko, 2011) can help refugee travelers make sense of their physical surroundings and thus contribute to the negotiation of the meaning of places and space, thus partaking in their users’ experience of mobility. They can also be used to challenge imaginations of “refugeeness” as shaped by regimes of mobility by being employed as performative artifacts, affecting the interpretation of their corporeal appearance by for example border guards as “illegal travelers” or “refugees”. Popular representations of refugee mobility, also with regard to their use of mobile technology, often reduce them to features of “bare humanity” (Malkki, 1996), which leaves room for the appropriation of those images by for example pretending to use phones for entertainment or business purposes.

However, while they can help to avoid and compromise the workings of mobility regimes in some cases, their role is still mainly determined by the greater systems of power that they are embedded in. Their importance for the mobility of a certain group of people defined as “illegal” is consequential to this very definition that draws lines between legal and illegal, legitimate and illegitimate, cosmopolitan travelers as ambassadors of modernity and those travelers constituting a “threat” and “security problem”. It is this very framing that necessitates them to develop alternative practices of mobility, in which technologies gain a heightened importance. As Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013) put it,

to understand the relative and changing definition of mobility and immobility, we need to place these concepts within a theory of unequal global-spanning relationships of power [...] These unequal relationalities are shaped by the social, political, cultural and economic relations of capital production as they play out within specific local contexts. (p.195f)

As I have shown in this thesis, the seemingly free flow of information via digital technology is however bound to asymmetrical power structures, because of their rootedness in space. The functionality of technological devices relies on immobile material structures in space, such as maintenance opportunities, but also network availability (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Yet, refugees are often forced to comply to remote localities and alternative routes in which such structures are weak or unavailable because of the necessity for them to be as invisible as possible. Connectivity is therefore another way for mobility regimes to retain control over the meaning of space and thus regulate the migratory movements within that space.

Furthermore, the merging of virtual and physical activities and trajectories inherent in new technologies' locative functionality not only enables their users to re-create the meaning of places, but also allows those interested in containing certain forms of mobility to track and thus regulate the trajectories of users online to conclude their physical location (and sometimes the other way around), thus creating dangers of surveillance and control.

Lastly, new technologies as a resource of mobility are unequally distributed. Factors of access and availability are influenced by economic and social assets, network connections, as well as the skills to operate successfully within the information landscapes created by digital media, creating a "digital divide" (Alam & Imran, 2015) among the mobile refugee population. While ICT can thus render some more flexible in their mobilities, they also have the potential of creating a new "immobile demographic" that is possibly more than ever linked to socio-economic status. In the words of Kraemer (2016), "new modes of connectedness [...] also generate new possibilities for disconnection" (p.127).

Thus, the main conclusion of this thesis is that, while the involvement of new technologies can prove to be useful tool for refugees to circumvent different agents of mobility regimes, they cannot be reduced primarily to their empowering function, but have to be seen as embedded in the "grid of power" (Kalir, 2013) created and maintained by illegality regimes of mobility, which sets the limits to the seemingly unrestricted movement of people and global virtual "flows" of information. When

thinking about the potential of ICT to challenge inhibitive and power-driven politics of refugee mobility, it should thus not be forgotten that their use is still inherently linked to the very systems of inequality and hegemonic discursive power over the mobility of people necessitating the “illegal” ways of mobility in whose execution technology can assist. While my interlocutors have in some ways benefitted from the affordances of digital technology and media in their individual projects of seeking protection in Finland, it has also become visible that they are quite aware of who profits the most from the systems of illegality of which information exchange via digital media is a part. I argue that the power relations of gains and losses within the self-sustaining system of the “illegality industry” (Andersson, 2014) might be marginally altered by the use of ICT – for example, with refugees having the chance to “verify”, to a certain extent, the trustworthiness of a smuggler, or providing them with the theoretical option of getting informed about their rights with a simple internet search – yet, the capability to act on this information is still accumulated with established actors such as aid organizations, coast guards, or border personnel, who hold leverage over the power to actualize retrieved information. Mobility thus remains “an act of power” (Lemos, 2010, p.413).

I therefore concludingly argue with S. that digital media and technology occupy an ambiguous role in current regimes of illegalizing mobility, in which particular actors profit from the framing and regulating of “illegal” movement of refugees:

*“So, you see, social media were used in two ways, a double-side sword. It was used in good way, as well as in bad way. A market for smuggling and human trafficking, as well as giving false information, inaccurate directions and information, misleading information – as well as helping people, and focal contact point for life saving, and things like that.” (S.)*

The involvement of technology might help us access systems of power and rethink concepts of “refugee mobility” by shifting the focus on the practices of mobility they employ. I have argued in this thesis that the mobility of people, objects, and information are not clearly separable; mobile technologies serve as a nexus point to observe this intersection of “mobility layers” and how “politics of mobility” (Cresswell, 2010a) shape their trajectories. Furthermore, mobile technologies can serve as a lens to see how experiences of mobility can be constituted in the interaction of practices, space, and representations. Thus, rather than trying to understand “the mobility of

refugees”, I argue that it is more appropriate to try and understand particular “constellations of mobility” (Cresswell, 2010a), situated in the context of regimes framing, defining, and controlling the movement of people, objects, information, and images.

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