



# Syrian refugees and information precarity

new media & society

2017, Vol. 19(2) 240–254

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DOI: 10.1177/1461444815591967

journals.sagepub.com/home/nms



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## Abstract

This study employed focus groups to examine the ways Syrian refugees living in a large refugee camp in Jordan are using cell phones to cope with *information precarity*, a condition of information instability and insecurity that may result in heightened exposure to violence. These refugees are found to experience information precarity in terms of technological and social access to relevant information; the prevalence of irrelevant, sometimes dangerous information; inability to control their own images; surveillance by the Syrian state; and disrupted social support.

## Keywords

Cell phone, Jordan, mobile phone, precarity, refugees, Syria

This study examines how Syrian refugees living in Jordan are coping with what we call *information precarity*, a term referring to the condition of instability that refugees experience in accessing news and personal information, potentially leaving them vulnerable to misinformation, stereotyping, and rumors that can affect their economic and social capital. Syria has been called one of the largest humanitarian disasters in a generation as

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6.4 million Syrians have been internally displaced, and 3.7 million have crossed into neighboring countries and registered as refugees as of early 2015 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2015).

We specifically focus on the refugees' use of cell phones, which they identify as a crucial resource akin to food, as a lens for understanding their experiences of information instability. Based on focus groups conducted in a Jordanian refugee camp, we found refugees experience information precarity in five forms: (1) technological and social access to information; (2) the prevalence of irrelevant, sometimes dangerous information; (3) lack of their own image control; (4) surveillance by the state; and (5) disrupted social support. Among the kinds of information that refugees highlighted as important to their daily lives was the following: information about personal networks in the camps, available camp programs and aid, news about personal networks in Syria, and news about the Syrian conflict.

## Framework for analysis

In seeking to understand the practices of Syrian refugees using cell phones, we draw on the concept of precarity, then, more specifically, consider literature focused on technology and transnational populations such as migrants and refugees. Precarity is a situation of ongoing unpredictability and insecurity in which people may be displaced and are frequently the objects of violence (Butler, 2004, 2009). While everyone may experience precarity, certain populations or segments of the population are more likely to. The term has often been used to characterize people's economic state but can also refer more broadly to political and social conditions (Butler, 2009). Indeed, Butler (2009) describes it as a "politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support" (p. 25), which might be caused by government policies, militarization, or other state processes. She argues that the state, the political entity charged with protecting its population, may also be their primary source of persecution and precarity (Butler, 2009). While Butler sees precarity in terms of the state, of particular relevance to this study, Banki (2013) expands this to include state and social/cultural processes as they affect refugees. She thus defines precarity as consisting of "forms of vulnerability and impediments to security and stability that stem from both formal (legal, political) and informal (social, cultural) processes" and further suggests that concept can be particularly effective in analyzing the social lives of refugees (p. 8).

While precarity is often seen as a disabling phenomenon in the lives of those who experience it, some researchers suggest precarity can provide an organizing force, especially for those who are treated as disposable by the state or society, because their shared condition may unite them for collective action (Schram, 2013). Ettlinger (2007) further argues that precarity can be seen to open possibilities for unsanctioned transformations, but also further state control. She asserts that state sponsored attempts to "protect" precarious populations may provide disciplinary norms for other state subjects to follow. This line of thought suggests organized attempts to alleviate precarity also lead to systems of control. In this article, we apply the concept of precarity to our examination of cell phone usage by Syrian refugees. Clearly, Syrian refugees are experiencing economic, social, and political precarity, but we also add to this a more specific category: *information precarity*,

a state in which their access to news as well as personal information is insecure, unstable, and undependable, leading to potential threats to their well-being.

## **Transnationalism and technology use**

A growing body of research examines the ways transnational populations—in particular, migrants and refugees—are using technologies such as cell phones in ways that may potentially change their social and economic lives (Archambault, 2011; Horst and Taylor, 2014). Transnational mobility has traditionally been viewed as producing isolation for those on the move; however, it is increasingly seen as more complicated than that. Technology can keep mobile populations connected to their home countries and, in some cases, help to create new connections and relationships with those in their new locations (Panagakos and Horst, 2006). Thus, some researchers suggest that cell phones serve multiple purposes that help maintain “transnational ties” (Vertovec, 2009: 61). Indeed, Vertovec (2009) goes so far as to call the widespread access to cell phones “the social glue of migrant transnationalism” (p. 54). While some might argue that migrants are a different case than refugees, increasingly researchers see these categories blurring (Mountz, 2011).

Scholars have particularly focused on the ways cell phones have been used to enhance or weaken familial ties among transnational populations. Many of these researchers are optimistic, such as Thomas and Lim (2010) who found mobile phone use by transnational migrants enhanced their well-being in terms of their levels of communication and intimacy with communities in their home countries and even within their diasporic communities. Likewise, Johnson (2013) suggests that mobile phones contribute to helping transnational migrants navigate their new urban homes and produce new networks of social connections.

Specifically, Thomas and Lim (2010) found maids in Singapore, often trapped within their employers homes for long periods of time, used cell phones for “ritual and escape” in order to maintain a sense of themselves beyond the job they performed as well as to forge “sociality and companionship” (pp. 183, 185). Domestic workers used cell phones to help them meet potential partners as well as to create new networks of friends and acquaintances who could help them expand their local networks to find new work opportunities, cheap airlines tickets, and so on. The researchers also found a negative category of “burdens and challenges” created by cell phone usage which includes the sometimes high costs or at least diversion of resources to pay for phone service as well as the difficulties of being expected to provide long-distance emotional support for those at home (Thomas and Lim, 2010: 188).

Horst (2006) found cell phones have altered the “perception of mobility among rural Jamaicans” (p. 144), allowing parents to constantly contact their children and spouses back home. In this way, migrant parents may be able to play more of a role in their children’s lives (Madianou and Miller, 2011). This can be done in particular by meeting emergency requests for money or other help. Migrants also “link-up” or create new social networks with others, which means they “become active agents within and possibly transform transnational social spaces” (Horst, 2006: 154). Horst and Taylor (2014) studied traders operating along the Haiti-Dominican Republic border where phone

usage required strategies such as identifying places to charge phones or keeping phone credits active. The devices were used both to conduct business and to maintain social connections.

Researchers further describe the cell phone as crucial for refugees and migrants to attempt to find security in their new environments—spaces where they are frequently experiencing great insecurity (from police or immigration services, from unethical or abusive employers or landlords, etc.). For example, Harney (2013) found African refugees in Italy used their phones to share with other migrants imminent threats such as police roundups. He writes that such cell phone use helps the migrants to Naples navigate their lives outside the state, bringing at least some stability and predictability.

Yet other researchers warn against an overly optimistic understanding of the relationship between technology and transnationalism. As Panagakos and Horst (2006) note, transnational migrants and others sometimes struggle to learn different types of communication devices, navigate national systems of operation, and pay for the overall cost of maintaining such technology. Archambault (2011), who studied the use of mobile phones in Mozambique, further suggests phones may transform intimate long-distance relationships in disruptive ways such as when they are used for personal surveillance (e.g. tracking spouses for fidelity). In these cases, she suggests that cell phones create disagreements. Thus, cell phones and other forms of technology appear to play both positive and negative roles in the lives of transnational mobile population groups such as refugees and migrants. Our aim here is to better understand the ways Syrian refugees in Jordan's largest refugee camp are using their cell phones as part of their wider strategies for coping with extreme precarity, including the insecurity and instability that arise from information precarity.

### **Research setting: Zaatari refugee camp**

The Syrian refugee crisis started in 2012, expanding rapidly as conditions in Syria deteriorated. Their movement into Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and to a lesser extent Egypt has created enormous strains on those countries' resources. In Jordan, Syrian refugees were initially welcomed by the state, although not all Syrians in Jordan register as official refugees. The majority relocated into urban areas where some had Jordanian relatives and where others found accommodation on their own, in part because this was where jobs, although often not legal, were expected to be found. Yet, many refugees had nowhere to go, arriving without social networks or financial capital. Indeed, some came with little more than a change of clothes.

This latter category end up or at least pass through Jordan's refugee camps (there were four when we visited and as of this writing now five). The largest by far is Zaatari, which was said to host 120,000 people at its peak, making it the fourth largest city in Jordan. According to UN estimates, that number had dropped to 81,000 as of summer 2014. The UNHCR provides basic necessities for the refugees living in the camp, including food and water, which are trucked in and distributed; health care (there are three main hospitals in the camp); and housing in the form of tents or small trailers called caravans. As part of the delivery of these services, at least 50 (unofficial numbers suggest nearly three times that figure) different governmental organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

also work within the camp (UNHCR country operations, 2014). In addition, a unique development in Zaatari has been the extremely rapid development of a market or *souk* area, which UNHCR officials report includes around 3000 small shops and kiosks. The main strip of shops is a bustling area of commerce with restaurants, cell phone kiosks, wedding dress rental shops, and more, including even a pet shop.

Many refugees are from small towns or villages in southern Syria where they would have known their neighbors or even considered them family. In Zaatari, they are in a crowded urban environment, unsure of the many strangers among whom they live. Zaatari has no signage, or other place indicators; no maps are posted and some areas are labyrinth. There is no public transportation. Some of the sick and elderly are carried by the “wheelbarrow boys” for a small fee. Private “taxis” can sometimes be hired during the day, but most refugees said they cannot afford these.

The camp is divided into neighborhoods, called Districts. Each District is made up of mostly caravans and in neighborhoods that house newly arrived residents, tents. When refugees have the resources to do so, they physically arrange caravans in small compounds consisting of extended families and occasionally others who are treated as family. Some caravans are used as family gathering spaces or community centers during the day for refugees in that neighborhood to socialize and discuss camp issues. Communal cooking and toilet/bathing facilities exist within each neighborhood, but many refugees seeking greater privacy, particularly toilets for women, have sought to jerry-rig their own facilities. These adaptations were noted and in some cases criticized by UN personnel for sanitary reasons but serve to remind us, as Malkki (1996) argues, that the refugee camp today is a system in which similar bureaucratized mechanisms are applied uniformly to vastly different refugee populations with little thought to the variations around the world and their specific situations.

### *Research procedures*

In December 2013 and June 2014, the authors traveled to Jordan to carry out this research. Our team visited all four refugee camps, but opted to base our research in Zaatari because it is home to the largest number of refugees by far. That said, access to all of the refugee camps is restricted. In the case of Zaatari, we gained permission to enter from Jordanian government officials who are responsible for the camp and its security (although the day-to-day operations are administered by the UNHCR). Security is a concern since there have been riots in Zaatari and more recently threats by the Islamic State, also known as ISIS, to kidnap Western aid workers in Jordan.

In December 2013, and June 2014, we conducted 10 focus groups with between 4 and 12 participants in each. Two focus groups consisted of four adults, all others consisted of between 5 and 12 people. Each focus group lasted 30–90 minutes. Five of the focus groups were women only; the rest were mixed genders. All participation was voluntary and followed informed consent procedures. We worked with UNHCR to identify refugees to interview and secure entrance to UN-run programs in the camp. We conducted interviews in caravans, tents, or outside under an awning within a program space run by UN Women. Participants were either members of family groups (and often that family’s neighbors) or participants in the activities of the UN Women’s Center. Focus groups were

conducted in Arabic, with the Jordanian member of the research team translating as needed for the other two researchers. Additional individual interviews were conducted with UNHCR representatives and Jordanian government officials directly involved with administering the camp. Despite the loss of nearly every possession, and in some cases a distrust for camp leadership, refugees willingly invited us into their living spaces, almost always serving us tea or coffee at the beginning of our discussions. We visited informally with each group for quite some time before beginning our focused conversations. During some focus groups, a television would be playing cartoons, religious programming, or news. In many of our focus groups, additional people—relatives, curious neighbors, and children—would wander in and out, sometimes joining the conversation, and in the case of children playing or crying.

In conducting this study, we adapt Banki's definition of precarity to the sphere of information, focusing on refugees' uses of, ability to access, and obstructions to information. In particular, we were interested in information relating to personal networks in the camps, available camp programs and aid, personal networks in Syria, and news about the Syrian conflict. Our overall aim in the study was to answer the following research question: In what ways were refugees' use of and access to personal and public information from within the refugee camp precarious, and how did they respond?

## **Information insecurity and refugee adaptations**

Through our research, we identified five areas of information precarity that refugees face and may try to answer with their cell phone practices. The five areas were technological and social access to information; the prevalence of irrelevant, dangerous information in the camp; refugees' lack of image control vis-a-vis the media; surveillance, in which refugees' phone communications are monitored; and refugees' disrupted social support and personal information networks. In this section, we detail these vulnerabilities as well as the responses refugees have had to these vulnerabilities. While they obviously face many other insecurities, our focus here is on the circulation of information.

### **Access**

*Technological access.* On a small dirt hill outside District 5, half a dozen Syrians stand near each other yet seem almost unaware of each other's presence. All have a mobile phone in their hand. This spot is believed to provide some of the best reception for mobile phones in the camp. Cell phones are viewed as a vital tool for acquiring and disseminating information; however, the ability to use cell phones is limited in the camp. While phones themselves are relatively easy to access (although with a cost), accessing a reliable phone network is not. Mobile phone coverage is spotty in much of the camp, which covers approximately 1300 acres or over 2 square miles (NYC's Central Park is 1.32 square miles in comparison). Nearly all of it is flat. Making transnational calls can be difficult because of disruptions of the Syrian phone system. For example, one focus group participant said that it can take up to 3 hours for her relative to "catch the line"—for the call to get connected. Another said that her sons in Syria now have to climb to the third, fourth, or fifth floor of a building to be able to get reception to make a call.

Nevertheless, because Zaatari is 7.5 miles from the Syrian border, many refugees are able to use their Syrian SIM cards from within the camp to call home; oftentimes, this means only within certain areas of the camp such as the dirt hill near District 5.

Of course phone coverage is connected to national borders for political reasons not technological ones and refugees must navigate between these systems with different owners and levels of control. In Jordan, the main mobile phone companies are Orange, which is a subsidiary of a French multinational telecommunications company, and Zain, a Kuwaiti company providing mobile service throughout the Middle East. Syria's largest mobile phone operator is SyriaTel, controlled by Rami Makhluaf, a Syrian businessman who is President Assad's cousin. Like cell phone companies everywhere, these systems are set up to benefit their owners and potentially the government which approves their presence within their borders. Thus, cell phone operators' coverage is not tied to users' needs but their own business priorities and the boundaries set by host countries.

*Social access.* In addition to network issues, some refugees identified obstacles in accessing information via the cell phones, or otherwise in terms of age, gender, or class. The access problems were particularly tied to gender. For example, younger female refugees who are not married typically did not use cell phones for communication (although they may have a phone to use for photographs or games), which some refugees said continued a practice from their lives in Syria. Yet, teenaged boys did use cell phones for communication; indeed, some elderly women said they relied on their sons or grandsons to call relatives and friends from Syria. In the family groups being interviewed, often—though not always—the men were the ones with the phone tucked into their pockets and not their wives, mothers, or daughters. This seemed especially true for older women. Refugee women also said that phone access or amount of usage was tied to how much money they had. To afford using their cell phone, refugees used their earnings from legal or illegal jobs, their savings, which they brought from Syria, donations from relatives and strangers, and money they received from exchanging UNHCR issued coupons. Refugees faced difficult decisions in terms of what to spend precious resources on, with many opting to keep a cell phone at the expense of other needs.

In other cases, access to information was simply happenstance. For example, women refugees who were participants in the UN Women's Fund activities and thus seemingly among those with more social capital and access to information in the camp sometimes described their information sources as inadequate, sporadic, and random. One woman talked about walking to the souk and overhearing strangers' conversations: "If there are two people talking in front of us, you can hear what they are saying, and the shops have their televisions on" sometimes showing the news. And in this way, they tried to listen and stay informed. As a result, less mobile residents of the camp expressed feeling less connected to camp information. Mobility was limited not only among the elderly but also among certain unmarried women who felt uncomfortable navigating the camp alone (or whose families felt uncomfortable with the prospect). Of course, even the "souk method" of information-gathering meant their information was partial, not always correct, and not entirely trustworthy. Indeed, this further embodies both the overall uncertainty of their lives and their responses; just as the refugees are attempting to create new neighborhoods

and public areas such as the souk, within these spaces, new information practices may need to develop.

*Appropriation.* Refugees can buy a Jordanian phone and SIM card within the camp in the souk, where there are dozens of small kiosks selling these. Some entrepreneurial refugees in the souk will recharge a phone's battery or download an app on it for a fee. They say Jordan offers better phone access from within the camp than their Syrian SIM cards. Refugees who bought SIM cards from both countries swap these in and out of their phones depending on who they were calling either because of security issues or reliability of coverage (which can vary by time of day and location within the camp). In these ways, the refugees seem to engage in a form of technological appropriation—consuming the devices in ways not necessarily envisioned by mobile service providers, who set up cell phone systems to operate within national borders. This is particularly interesting in light of the official means provided within the camp of connecting with family back in Syria: the International Red Crescent's phone calling program through which refugees—under the supervision of the NGO—can make a 3-minute call home every 2 weeks. These calls are meant to help them locate relatives and refugees are not allowed to talk about politics. Some refugees said they didn't bother with these sort of calls because of the time limit. Thus, this organizational attempt to overcome information precarity by allowing refugees to phone home also established norms that refugees had to adapt to in order to participate. As Ettliger (2007) argues, attempts to alleviate precarity can serve to control or contain populations. For example, one refugee who used this official calling system told us he had to carefully memorize what he would say so as not to exceed the 3-minute limit. While the IRC's program was intended to help, it also reinforces the refugees' lack of control over their own communication.

### *Irrelevant, dangerous information*

Although the war has had global implications leading to considerable coverage in the news, refugees still said that they weren't getting enough information about unfolding events, and by that they usually meant that they were not getting enough specific information about their home village or town or information they believed was accurate or complete. Refugees wanted information about everyday life of those they left behind—from the health of relatives to the condition of crops (Internews, 2013). They also wanted to learn about the conditions of their towns and cities and whether there has been recent shelling or attacks there. As one refugee said, "Not everything is covered on television. Sometimes we only hear of it through the phone."

A second concern was with the credibility of the information about what was happening in the camp in terms of accessing water, food, health care, and education for their children; how to qualify and collect assistance from the UN as well as information about the conditions in Syria (e.g. during our second visit, an "election" was being held in Syria). Suspicion about information is not surprising considering they have spent their lives in an authoritarian country and the propaganda and misinformation have only increased since the uprising. Even while acknowledging the widespread power of social media in the conflict, some refugees also noted that they could not entirely trust that



medium either as “rumors spread on Facebook.” Thus, social media sources, which were attributed with fueling the revolution by the refugees, were also seen as sources of misinformation. “I don’t trust information that comes on Facebook” one refugee said. “People were just making stuff up.” Another man simply said, “Thank God” it was not personally available to him in the camp. The refugees further complained about the lack of clear, easily accessible information about how the camp operated, in particular having to do with access to resources.

*Personal verification.* One adaptive practice refugees frequently mentioned using to cope with the lack of relevant or trustworthy information was to try to verify it themselves. This included information such as news about the civil war in Syria—where the government had control or was gaining or losing it, what was the status of their relatives, including some who were in prison, and so on. For example, one man explained that “whenever we get information ... we will call to see if it is right” (i.e. to check to see whether the information is accurate). Sometimes, they call home and find out what’s happening in advance of or in contradiction to television reports. An example one refugee gave was that “through the phone someone told me that two relatives had been killed.” A couple of hours later, his brother called and confirmed that they were in fact killed but in a different location than what was then being reported on satellite television. To counter the broad coverage of the war on television, which seldom answered the most important questions to them (How were their relatives coping? Were they alive?), they often called home to find out the current levels of fighting within their hometown or village, asking as one refugee explained, “Has there been a bombing or not? If there is a bombing, hopefully nobody died. We don’t ask about anything except for this.” Another refugee said, “I trust only this 100%,” holding up his mobile phone. However, since refugees also talked about the phone as the source of social networking sites which they relied on in some cases extensively, this suggests what was truly trusted was other people with whom he had close ties—family and friends—who they communicated with either in person or via the phone.

This speaks to the intersection of public and private information for the refugees. The kinds of information they most urgently pursue is about the personal well-being of family members and home communities. In addition to seeking out this personal information directly, refugees may seek public information about operations in the camp or news in Syria to the extent that it shapes their personal lives, or of those close to them. However, due to the real or perceived threat of surveillance, even this sort of public information is often discussed in personalistic terms. For example, instead of asking whether the Free Syrian Army has regained control of one’s home village, one might ask about whether a relative who is associated with that village is “home.”

### *Image control*

Refugees are frequently viewed by society as having less value: they are disposable (Malkki, 1996; Verdirame and Harrell-Bond, 2005). Their lives and deaths appear to matter less than others. This is another face of information precarity, the sense by the refugees that information about their situation is not available to the rest of the world or

ignored by those who receive it and, second, the information about themselves, which frequently they have shared with outsiders, is distorted in harmful ways.

Refugees often believed that their situation had been forgotten by the world, that their horrific experiences in the Syrian conflict were not viewed as important enough to bring any help. Did the world not see what was happening in their country, they wondered. During one focus group, a man pulled out his mobile phone and flipped to a graphic photo of the mutilated body of a child, saying this was a child he personally knew. The photo on his phone was physical evidence that their suffering was real, reflecting that Syrian lives are what Butler (2009) has called “grievable,” or the idea that some lives are considered valuable enough to mourn and others are not. The refugee waving his phone image at us seemed to be a way of underlining that Syrian lives mattered. Showing such graphic images via social networking sites has become one of the ways Syrians have tried to exert some control over these images or at least to make themselves part of the global narrative about the conflict they are actually experiencing themselves.

Agency representatives, celebrities, journalists all come to the camps and ask questions, take photographs, and then leave and the refugees’ situation remains the same. Often, visitors take cell phone photographs without permission and post to social networking sites, which are then potentially globally circulated through networked communication. In some cases, refugees told us, journalists took photographs without permission. One particular area where women refugees believed they and their daughters had been made more insecure was through news stories about younger women in the camp being married off to older men. In some cases, the men were said to be from the Gulf States and willing to pay for a young bride. Yet, some scholars argue that such stories frequently lack nuance or were inaccurate (Alhayek, 2015). (Alhayek notes that Syrian women from rural areas, such is the case with many within Zaatari, often marry at much younger ages than urban and certainly Western women.) The women we interviewed were angry and scared for their family’s honor, a loss of which could make them pariahs or even be seen as a sign for violence to be committed against them within the camp. Another woman told us her photograph had been taken by a news crew and then posted online with a completely different story in a way that had put her in danger. Thus, their information and images, shared with outsiders, sometimes willingly and sometimes not, have been taken out of their control and distributed in ways they believe make them vulnerable. In some cases, this is through cell phones, and in other cases, more professional equipment is used; the misuse of images comes to the refugee’s attention through accessing social networking sites on their phones. The idea that the refugees are isolated and will never see or hear of an Instagram post or news story is simply not true.

This is important because as researchers such as Malkki (1996) argue, refugees overall have a tendency to be silenced. This happens in part because the institutional apparatus asserts itself in establishing the spaces and ways refugees will live whenever they are inside of official refugee camps. Indeed, the camp administration tends to shape the information spaces of Zaatari and other such spaces around the world, creating what Malkki (1996) calls “a peculiar kind of speechlessness” as “the languages of refugee relief, policy science, and ‘development’ claim the production of authoritative narratives about the refugee” (p. 386).

*Crafting alternative stories.* After expressing their frustration and anger about the misuse of images taken of them, the women explained that youth living outside the camps had set up Facebook pages to publicly challenge these narratives. What was interesting about this revelation was that even women who did not appear to have Internet access were aware of these efforts to disseminate alternative stories about them, suggesting greater levels of connection with the world outside the camp than might be expected. In another example, an NGO established a camp magazine, and the women refugees dismissed it as another mediated attempt to distort their lives, complaining that their photos were used without permission and taken out of context. Many of the women sharing this critique had less than high school educations; for example, several had worked as tailors in Syria, and yet had become media literate about what sort of permissions journalists and others were expected to seek. (In a further telling response to the magazine's attempts to narrate the refugees to themselves, one UNHCR official told us that instead of serving as audiences for the publication, refugees were using the pages of the publication in the souk as wrapping paper for food items.)

### *Surveillance*

Cell phones are perceived as much more than social devices. They have become widely viewed as tools helping challenge or overthrow governments. Refugees said that in Syria, having a mobile phone was risky and having foreign numbers appear in a call list even more so. As one refugee said, "At checkpoints, the most important thing confiscated was the mobile phone." Many refugees said that they personally knew people detained for receiving calls from outside the country. They believed the Syrian government tracks international calls to identify those opposed to the regime. The government filters even text messages and began using special software for monitoring and even archiving mobile communication including phone calls, emails, and other forms of communication even before the uprising (Freedom House, 2012). In extreme cases, refugees said, "they can close down the mobile phone network, so that is a main communication problem." The refugees described the phone as a powerful tool, connecting Syrians in ways they were not supposed to connect—as opponents or critics of the regime. The government's control of information sources combined with their targeting of cell phones within Syria served to demonstrate how important phones are, contributing to refugees seeing the devices as more than a utility but a means to take political actions.

*Protecting their communication.* In response to the Syrian government control, refugees developed new phone use practices. Within the camp, some said that they had sent Jordanian mobile phones/SIM cards to family back home believing that calls using Jordanian devices could not be monitored by the Syrian government. One refugee noted that "If I say something against the regime or give out too much information, then the Syrian mobile phone gets disconnected."

One woman said that when the revolution started, she and her family and friends were freely sharing information on their phones, but when the regime began detaining and killing her relatives, they started using codes "to make it secure." Like many others, when she calls Syria, she assumes that the government is listening in with the aim of

punishing whoever is receiving the call. Because of that, the refugees both self-censor and use coded language.

Simple questions such as how is the weather could represent much heavier meanings such as people being killed, bombing runs, and so on. In fact, the use of coded language is a long-standing practice in Syria where the slightest criticism of the regime could result in imprisonment or worse (Neggaz, 2013). Refugees in Zaatari gave numerous examples of using coded language with their relatives back home such as there had been a “heavy rain” back in their hometown in Syria to indicate there had been bombing in the area.

Some said they simply avoided topics that might cause whoever they are talking with trouble. One refugee noted, “Here, we are living peacefully, but you have to think of them. Anything political you say might affect them negatively.” She avoids even using specific names and keeps her questions general such as “How is my sister?” In hopes of protecting whoever she calls, she never asks the people she is talking to about their exact location or for any details that could be used to quickly determine where they are. Some said if the area was controlled by the Free Syrian Army, which opposes the regime, they spoke freely, while one refugee said he did not bother with coded language because “there is nothing left” (i.e. he has nothing left to lose). In this case, the refugee has given up on the need to be careful when using his phone. Seemingly, the phone has become an extension of the Syrian government’s ability to track and control its population, an instrument to aid in oppression rather than a tool to resist information vulnerability.

### *Disrupted social support*

The loss of family support was especially disturbing to refugees who rely on close kinship networks back home. Similar to previous research, refugees call family and friends in Syria to maintain connections and achieve some well-being. For example, one woman said that she called her sister, who had fled to Iraq where she was also a refugee, to hear her voice. They shared memories of Syria and intense personal feelings. Her sister, she said, told her she simply wanted to go home and die. Another said, “We share their happiness and their sadness,” which includes milestones such as births and weddings that normally bring them all physically together. Refugees thus talked about cell phones as crucial devices because they are a means of sharing the realities of what those left behind were experiencing. They frequently ask family back in Syria “Is there electricity, water, bread? Do you have the necessities?” The phone calls seem to serve not so much as a solution—what after all could the refugees do to help—but as the personal witnessing of a loved one’s plight.

Within the camp, fear of their new environment and economic distress led many refugees to keep their children out of school (fearing for their safety or needing their children to work to help the family survive). This was especially true for women refugees who sometimes described fear of even going to the toilet blocks after dark. For some refugees, the camp was an alienating environment, sometimes difficult to navigate and survive literally and metaphorically. For them, sometimes the phone was seen as helping them adapt. One woman refugee explained that

When you leave the house, you have to have the mobile phone because you don't know what will happen. You might be sitting in an area where nobody knows you. Maybe you have an emergency. With the mobile phone, you can ask for help.

Another woman gave an example of having to work extra hours (a very small percentage of refugees are hired by the UN to carry out tasks such as cleaning or guard work). It was important to be able to use the phone to call her family and let them know she would be late. What is particularly notable about these examples is that they are bound up with changing gender roles within the camp. Many of the women refugees would never have worked outside the home back in Syria; within the camp, they might be the only one employed in their family. Uy-Tioco (2007) argues that cell phones enable "masculinization" of transnational women who are separated from their families but that they also reinforce traditional roles, in terms of providing support to family left behind (p. 262). These complex patterns seem true for at least some of the Syrian women refugees as well.

*Forging new families.* In creating "new families" even new spaces for themselves, including new neighborhoods in their districts, refugees shared not just information but also communication technologies themselves. In some cases, phones were used by several members of a family while refugees who didn't own a phone said that they could borrow one from a family member or friends if they needed to make a call.

## Conclusion

As much previous research documents, mobile phones are seen as a vital tool by transnational populations such as refugees, potentially enabling social and economic networks to remain strong, be repaired, or developed anew or, in some cases, disrupting these connections in less positive ways. However, this study of Syrian refugees finds that refugees view the phone within a broader political context. As refugees repeatedly told us, the "mobile phone played a huge role in the revolution" and "because of the mobile phone, the world found out what was happening in Syria." This later statement is of particular note because it presents the cell phone as more than a transom for the communication of personal information that would be of little interest to anyone not part of an individual phone call. Here, the ways information is disseminated by news organizations and other services is viewed as another element interacting with the ways refugees use cell phones.

Refugees identified news as one of the key pieces of content that they both sought and disseminated themselves. This may be because the phone has become their tool for accessing the Internet and thus is used for multiple tasks, but it may also be because the phone itself is seen as more powerful because of the revolution. This does not mean broader types of news are not sought by other refugees or migrants but that most studies do not focus in that direction. While maintaining and establishing personal connections remain important, the Syrian refugees are also interested in their own global images and other forms of news, which they seek to verify or disseminate with their own specifics added. Thus, refugees are able to counter, supplement, or reinforce professional news

with their own networks of cell phone-connected family and friends. If refugees were still living in their homes, they would know whether a bomb had been dropped nearby or someone they knew was injured or killed. Here, they verify television's broad coverage with their own specifics.

Yet, this is not quite a story of refugee empowerment, or as Horst and Taylor (2014) note, agency via the phone is always partial and fragile. Their usage is vulnerable to technological issues such as accessing a connection, alternative SIM cards, and, perhaps most importantly, continued government surveillance. Likewise, the refugees can become aware of their own images being distributed online in ways that leave them with seemingly little agency; they are potentially victimized by others' choices of what to do with their information. In order to better understand all of these processes, we introduce the term information precarity as a way of problematizing the idea that merely having a cell phone solves information problems. Information precarity allows us to view the difficulties refugees face through a communication lens that suggests, as one refugee told us, "the mobile phone is as important as water and food" while still keeping in mind the obstacles in getting these necessities, and the ways their strategies to cope with information precarity were uneven and unpredictable. Ultimately, as Ettlinger (2007) suggests, uncertainty creates possibilities for both new forms of social control as well as for potentially transformative actions. The refugees' unstable environment has indeed contributed to new vulnerabilities along with new practices to engage with these same obstacles in sometimes resourceful and creative ways.

## Funding

This research received funding from California State University- Northridge, Worcester State University, and Lasell College.

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