

# Refugee resettlement, social media and the social organization of difference

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**Abstract** *Social media platforms allow refugees separated by distance to share information, provide support and exchange resources across borders. This connection has the potential to transform resettlement experiences as people maintain significant and ongoing relationships with transnational networks. Yet, since refugee resettlement programmes generally only scale up to the national imagination, integration remains a normative framework in most policy spheres. This article presents a 12-month digital ethnography of 15 refugees settled in New Zealand with a view to examining their transnational practices of social media and its influence on integration and belonging. Drawing on a conceptual framework based on the social organization of difference, it contains a discussion on how online global networks increasingly inform the domains of encounters, representations and configurations. The role of social media for refugee resettlement futures and its implications for integration at times of rapid political, technological and social change concludes the article.*

**Keywords** INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES, INTEGRATION, REFUGEES, RESETTLEMENT, SOCIAL MEDIA, TRANSNATIONALISM

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The rapid proliferation and availability of information communication technologies – particularly the smartphone and social media – herald new ways for refugees to connect across distances. With more than 68 million people forcibly displaced, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2018) acknowledges the potential of social media to ‘digitally reunite’ proximate and distant networks. Applications such as Facebook, Skype, WhatsApp, Snapchat and others deliver platforms that bring families and friends together through audio and visual communication in synchronous and asynchronous formats. These tools provide physically separated people with an opportunity to share information, give support and exchange resources across borders. Such forms of connection can potentially transform local resettlement experiences as people maintain significant and ongoing relationships with transnational networks.

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Here, I consider refugee resettlement futures in an attempt to articulate what social media interactions represent during times of rapid political, technological and social change. Drawing on a 12-month digital ethnography with 15 participants from refugee backgrounds living in New Zealand, I consider the implications for belonging and integration when people simultaneously connect to 'here' and 'there' through social media. In this article, Vertovec's (2015) theoretical framework on the social organization of difference is applied to unpack the implications for refugee integration of these digital platforms connecting proximal and distant networks in new and novel ways.

### **Dislocation in an age of connection**

In an age of increasing digital connectivity, people can connect instantly and continuously across space and time through social media. The UNHCR (2016) report on digital communications and forced migration highlights that refugees have increasing access to infrastructure for mobile communications. This access, however, is far from uniform as refugees are 50 per cent less likely to have an internet-enabled phone relative to the general population (UNHCR 2016). The report also states that refugees can spend a third of their disposable income on mobile communications, thus highlighting not only the barriers to communication but also the extent to which people forego other necessities to maintain links with their networks.

Nearly 15 years ago, Vertovec (2004) wrote about how cheap calls facilitated through phone cards served as a 'social glue' that sustained small-scale transnational formations. This 'glue' has largely shifted to the digital environment where people can interact (at times free of cost) through video, audio and text-based communications. The associated social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Skype, Viber, Instagram, Snapchat and various ethno-national specific ones (Weibo, Kakao Talk, WeiChat) facilitate these interactions. The Ericsson (2017) mobility report suggests that there are 5.3 billion unique mobile subscribers globally with an increase of nearly 100 million subscribers in the third quarter of 2017 alone. This report shows how data traffic grew 65 per cent between 2016 and 2017, thereby highlighting not only the increased number of users but also a massive uptake in data exchange with total traffic predicted to grow eightfold by 2023. These trends demonstrate that the influence of social media is interwoven into the ways that people negotiate, sustain and create networks – from local to transnational scales (IOM 2017). This applies particularly to resettled refugees who can now connect instantly with family and friends from their countries of origin and diaspora.

### *Integration, transnational networks and social media*

Transnational networks extend beyond national borders and provide a site for belonging, even a sense of home, through which people maintain and sustain relationships (Blunt 2007; Perkins and Thorns 2011). Basch et al. (1994: 6) note that transnationalism involves 'the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement'. In particular, social media platforms have shown great promise as an additional *strand* in connecting these

groups in increasingly intimate and textured ways. These online interactions offer new affordances in the ways people can practise family, engage in politics and participate in public life as proximal and distant networks are simultaneously linked. Such contexts highlight the additional complexities of achieving social cohesion and civic participation when these activities can occur on local, national and transnational levels.

The contested debates about what constitutes *successful integration*, how it can be measured and who is involved, include not only the refugees themselves but also the nations, institutions and societies that receive them (Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore 2018; Strang and Ager 2010). As people's physical and virtual mobilities grow (albeit unevenly), integration is increasingly understood as something that occurs within and beyond national borders (Marlowe 2018). People may establish belonging in multiple places informed through biography, relationships, culture, economic opportunity and length of residence in a given locality (Antonsich 2010; Yuval-Davis 2011). The consequence of such dynamics is that a sense of belonging and integration can be either relatively stable or ephemeral depending on time, place and context.

The literature on refugee integration in resettlement contexts has begun to advocate moving beyond a normative paradigm to recognizing the diversification of difference, or the ways in which superdiversity influences settlement trajectories and outcomes (Alencar 2017; Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore 2018). Through the 'diversification of diversity' (Vertovec 2007), *superdiversity* provides a context in which to understand these dynamics and contemporary developments as refugees integrate into a receiving resettlement society. This diversification goes beyond standard markers like ethnicity, religion, class, gender and education to include contexts such as migration status, labour market distribution, geographic locality, political ideologies, transnational interaction and others. These interconnections are critical to understanding contemporary migration, mobilities and their impact on geographic place.

Within this diversification, the role of social media has attracted substantial attention in relation to how it can influence integration outcomes, the development of social capital, and sustain transnational relationships (Alencar 2017; Marlowe 2018). For instance, Keles's (2016) study of the Kurdish diaspora in the UK determined that, despite predictions of communication technologies eroding political participation and civic engagement, social media increased these activities. This study highlighted the blurred (and blurring of) boundaries between virtual and offline communities that assisted with creating relationships and improving settlement outcomes such as gaining employment and participating in education. Others illustrate how social media influence people's decisions about leaving their country of residence and undertaking a forced migration journey that emphasize both the possibilities and the dangers that these platforms afford (Gillespie et al. 2018; NurMuhammad et al. 2015).

As networking tools, social media help people keep in touch with their friends and families back home. For many, these platforms effectively fulfil an affective need. Multiple studies confirm the significance of *virtual* spaces within the daily lives and activities of modern populations and refugees are no exception (Dekker and Engbersen 2014; Marlowe et al. 2016; Wilding 2012). Andrade and Doolin (2016) found that computers assisted refugees to evaluate resettlement opportunities and served as a

portal that kept them connected to cultural roots and traditions. In these studies, it is common to find examples of refugees considering access to social media as important as having food and water – effectively a ‘life line’ (Gillespie et al. 2018). The popular internet meme that places Wi-Fi at the base of Maslow’s (1975) hierarchy of needs exemplifies how maintaining these online relationships and interactions is essential not only for refugee well-being but for the whole society.

In these contexts, digital literacy and accessibility are increasingly important aspects of active citizenship for resettled refugees. However, the *digital divide* can exacerbate inequality and reduce opportunities to participate in civic life that include limiting access to health and educational services, accommodation and employment support, and online governmental amenities (Dekker and Engbersen 2014; Khorshed and Sophia 2015). What becomes clear in this literature is that addressing the digital divide is not about solely focusing on one particular social location (ethnicity, age, gender, and so on) as the diversification of diversity clearly entails.

### *The social organization of difference*

In these changed social (and digital) conditions, there is a need to return to integration models to re-theorize how fluid and super-diverse communities influence new modalities of social relations and transnational interaction within resettlement sites (particularly urban). To capture these dynamics, Vertovec (2015) proposes an interactive conceptual framework around the *social organization of difference*. The framework is composed of three domains, which directly relate to, and influence, one another but are not subsumable:

- configurations: social and demographic structures;
- representations: concepts, images and discourses; and
- encounters: fleeting and sustained interactions.

The *configurations* emphasize the structural conditions that enable and/or constrain how people live their daily lives. Such structures include institutions of governance, political forces and economic geographies that determine people’s opportunities to exercise agency and mobility. *Representations* provide the ‘conceptual ordering’ of the ways in which particular social phenomena are communicated through language, media, public discourses and shared memory. These social concepts and categories inform wider consensus and norms around particular phenomena – effectively constructing how the wider society understands and embraces refugee issues. Like configurations, power relations shape representations and communicate these messages across society. *Encounters* refer to the various human interactions that are generally micro-sociological but can also speak to broader sociological interactions and processes (see Vertovec 2015: 15).

With respect to the social organization of difference, these three domains provide a basis for understanding how the media and political discourses (representations) can

reify or essentialize understandings of refugee resettlement. The associated conceptual ordering can thereby justify certain policy directives or governance structures (configurations) and everyday interactions (encounters). Likewise, configurations and encounters can influence the representation of refugee issues that can enable or hinder opportunities for integration. Thus, these three domains interact and inform one another, thus making the conceptual framework dynamic, contextual and contingent. Increasingly, social media are the organizing and evolving forces that inform the relationships and outcomes within this theoretical framework.

For instance, Donald Trump Jr's controversial tweet comparing Syrians with a bowl of Skittles (a type of sweet) was a representation circulated during the 2016 US presidential election campaign. 'If I had a bowl of Skittles and I told you that just three would kill you, would you take a handful? That's our Syrian refugee problem.' This grossly inaccurate representation, instantly retweeted more than 17,000 times, inflamed a moral panic about refugees being terrorists. While this tweet was robustly debunked, the Trump administration used its representation (among numerous others) to justify policy changes like the immigration ban on several Muslim countries on the grounds that they presented risks to US interests and security. The number of refugees resettled in 2017 was less than half that of 2016 due, in large part, to the halted programme and reduced intake into the United States (UNHCR 2018). Thus, representations inform configurations and vice versa. Likewise, it is possible to see how everyday interactions (encounters) can directly inform or challenge particular refugee discourses (representations) that consequently modify refugee related policies and support (configurations).

The damaging implications of certain representations and configurations noted earlier can also be informed through others where inclusive policies, affirming representations and interaction yield positive outcomes for tolerance and social relations across difference. A commitment to challenging Australia's policy of mandatory detention through a people's inquiry and engaged public debate helped to change it (Briskman et al. 2008). Another example is how the representation of the death of the Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi, galvanized national responses to the refugee crisis and various societal understandings of the associated issues (Slovic et al. 2017).

These examples signal how the social organization of difference is dynamic. The international response to Aylan Kurdi was relatively short-lived and the rise of right-wing, anti-immigration platforms have gained political ascendancy in multiple places. What is important to recognize about these three domains is that there can be 'domain lag' whereby a change in one fails to create an immediate effect on or to influence the others (Vertovec 2015). This can make negotiating the social organization of difference so challenging – all three domains directly impinge on one another and yet it is difficult to influence these simultaneously. As there is lag between the three domains, activity in one can open up an opportunity to influence the others (Vertovec 2019).

In relation to this conceptual framework, social media exert a growing influence on these configurations, representations and encounters. As a powerful medium for the exchange of interaction, support and information, digital communications are increasingly becoming integral to how refugees meaningfully settle and belong. These new

contexts not only create patterns of inequality and discrimination but also open up novel forms of social contact and previously unimagined opportunities. Vertovec (2015) espouses the need for methodological innovation to capture these dynamics – hence my 12-month study to ascertain how 15 people from refugee backgrounds maintain contact with local and transnational networks via social media using a range of online methods. In particular, in this article, I examine how social media influence the social organization of difference and its impact on refugee integration from local to transnational scales.

### **Study design**

This digital ethnography reports how 15 people from refugee backgrounds practise transnational family and friendship through social media and what this represents for people's everyday interactions in New Zealand. The country has historically accepted 750 refugees a year as part of its quota programme with more than 30,000 refugees resettled since the Second World War. Upon arrival, refugees attend a six-week orientation programme before settling into a government nominated settlement locality that has tailored supports (see Marlowe and Elliott 2014).

Digital ethnography involves the capture of people's everyday lives through the online environment (Murthy 2008). This 12-month research project incorporated online methods that included 50 interviews, informal monthly discussions and 472 social media diaries with a focus on how social media influences the experience of resettlement. Eight females and seven males participated in the study. Four of these were Afghans plus one from each of the following ethno-national groups – Awhazi (Iran), Chin Burmese, Rwandan, Sudanese, South Sudanese, Bhutanese, Tamil (Sri Lanka), Kurdish, Syrian, Eritrean, and one other who did not wish to be identified for safety reasons. Most of the participants were well educated and all were sufficiently competent in written and spoken English to take part in the interviews and write the online diaries. Each participated in three to four interviews and wrote regular online social media diaries in Qualtrics each month about what social media applications they were using, with whom, for what reasons and how this made them feel. These ongoing points of interaction provided the basis for the constant comparative method and theoretical sampling as informed by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). The participants were living in several main New Zealand refugee resettlement localities – Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Nelson and Palmerston North. With few exceptions, all interactions with participants were through video-enabled online platforms such as Skype, WhatsApp and Viber.

Recruitment took place through third-party refugee-based organizations. Of the 15 participants, 13 completed the study in 12 months. The other two did not complete it because, at the halfway point, the university determined that the project must pay participants for their time instead of providing them with grocery vouchers (valued at up to \$200 per month). The associated tax implications meant that these participants decided to discontinue with the study when the university (as opposed to the ethics committee) imposed this requirement.

The study received the approval of the associated institution in terms of human ethics, though it was necessary to go back to the ethics committee on two further occasions to amend a couple of themes that emerged through the constant use of comparisons over time (Charmaz 2006). Theoretical sampling was achieved through subsequent interviews and informal online interactions with participants. After the initial coding and memo writing, all data were imported into NVivo™ for the focused coding processes. These categories were confirmed through the emergent analysis of the data that highlighted the role of social media for everyday encounters associated with refugee resettlement.

### **Findings: encounters – fleeting and sustained**

The findings of this study are structured around Vertovec's (2015) work on the social organization of difference and focus predominantly on the domain of *encounters* – interactions that are fleeting and sustained. Examining the encounters below, I unpack how social media allowed participants simultaneously to maintain their commitments in New Zealand and transnationally. By focusing on these relationships, it is possible to examine the different intimacies that social media afford within such encounters and what purposes or functions they serve in a resettlement context. The discussion that follows considers the associated implications for the social organization of difference as it relates to configurations and representations.

In this article, I identify participants only by number and gender. This is because there were no significant differences between ethnic groups in the reported results and, in some cases, to protect the confidentiality of individuals and their transnational networks. Where relevant, I mention age, education and other social locations throughout the text. First, to outline the role of social media in connecting participants to their transnational and local networks, I present the latter's perceptions of how social media affect their experiences of integration.

#### *Integration*

Overall, the participants were unequivocal about the role of social media in helping them and other refugees integrate and develop a sense of belonging in New Zealand. As Participant 7, a female, put it:

I think [social media] are very, very important for refugee people. Because this is one ... [means whereby] they get to connect to the people around [them and to] ... their loved ones and then [this] is going to give people hope of meeting them again. It is very important in order to build themselves up to keep themselves alive in the sense [of keeping] their soul alive.

Through the use of similar expressions, others shared this idea of keeping their 'souls alive'. All the participants related to this form of connection as being foundational not only to their well-being for resettlement but also to their participation in New Zealand life. The same participant wrote in her diary that 'I could feel more confident while

sharing things through social media than meeting people and talking live. I think interacting through social media could give me practice doing things [related to resettlement] with more confidence.’ Participant 5, a male, saw ‘social media as a basic need for everyday life’ and Participant 2, also male, said that ‘if we do not have connection to each other then we will definitely get depressed ... mental issues, psychological issues. Because we grow when we are in connection and support each other.’

These comments show how social media have helped to facilitate connection with friends, family and, importantly, people who would not normally be part of their social network. Their interactions with friends and family provided them with the basic level of well-being they needed to engage in civic activities (such as work, education, sports and community events) in New Zealand, which in turn helped them to identify and access opportunities related to such activities.

These interactions also carry cautions for refugee resettlement and integration. Nearly all the participants acknowledged that social media could present an obstacle for refugees’ opportunities to integrate. As Participant 9 (female) explains:

They [social media] probably hinder it because if your social media and your interactions are with people outside New Zealand, you can get a false sense that everything is OK. You don’t really have to make new friends in a new land. Because you still have those connections and they are interactions with people, you are blessed with forever. And I think that connection can be quite dangerous. Yeah, I think it can hinder integration actually in a way.

What is clear from this comment is that social media do not provide a digital utopia. Eight of the 15 participants (mostly female) directly referred to social media as an ‘addiction’ or something controlling their lives. Participant 4, a female, said that ‘they [social media platforms] are addictive. We have to limit their use. It’s a really good tool in many ways but if you use it a lot it’s going to affect your abilities to talk to people in real life.’ Participant 3, also a female, went on to say that:

The more we use social media, the more we rely on it, the more it takes our time; it literally sucks away our life. Yeah, I mean it is doing that. For me, I’m trying to control it, but even my mum [is addicted. When] I go home and I see my mum, [she] is in front of Facebook and sometimes I have to really tell her, ‘You have to get off Facebook because I’ve come to visit you.’ And it is happening more and more often.

The participants acknowledged that keeping online diaries had given them new insights into their daily social media practices in terms of the people with whom they were interacting, for what purposes and for how long. After thinking about this, a number of them tried to reduce the amount of time they spent on social media and found it difficult to achieve. For some, giving up social media would mean ceasing to be social.

Overall, the participants felt that social media made it easier for people from refugee backgrounds to integrate. Similarly, it changes the nature of integration in



terms of who one is interacting with and where the sites of belonging are located. Most of the participants acknowledged the role of social media in supporting civic activities (associated with such things as employment, education and voting) and noted how it changed the way they interacted with their ethnic communities and, for some, increased their engagement with New Zealanders. Participant 1 saw social media as her life, as ‘like a bridge you know, just like bridge between me and my community here, my community in New Zealand, and also me and my friends overseas’.

Where participants acknowledged that social media had promoted their interactions with other New Zealanders, they tended to emphasize that it had been through engaging in formal education in their settlement locality. Thus, social locations (gender, education, age) and face-to-face interactions influence people’s social media encounters. In the following two subsections, I examine how social media formed a bridge between transnational and New Zealand based networks to groups defined by distance and difference.

### *Transnational encounters*

Ongoing interactions with transnational networks provided a basis for significant encounters with overseas family and friends. Participants revealed that maintaining regular (often daily) interaction with transnational networks through social media was central to feeling ‘in place’. Participant 6, a male, spoke of how

social media decrease the distance between New Zealand and my home country. Although it is around 24 hours by plane, I feel like nowadays we are in one home. Immediately, I can see what is happening there and I get information and their news, and they get my news. Thus, we can say that the media are very important for us nowadays.

This reduced distance through social media provides sustained connection and meaningful interaction. With the exception of one participant, the main reason to use social media was to maintain contact with overseas family and friends. ‘I get about 300 WhatsApp messages, 150 Viber messages, and maybe about 50 Messenger phone calls [a day]. That’s a lot’ (Participant 10, male). While not all these messages were directed specifically to him (some were group-based chats), it does highlight the extensive networks and time expended to maintain these transnational links. As Participant 7, a female, said,

I am able to keep myself connected to everybody in the world. [Social media] made me feel like I never missed anybody so badly because there was that second choice, like second option. Social media enabled me to keep in touch, like not having to be there in person. Social media are there always.

This idea of a second choice represents a form of digital unification and ‘co-presence’ (Robertson et al. 2016) that brings people’s global networks into everyday

interactions. It effectively blurs the boundaries of what constitutes *real* interaction as participants could participate in the births, marriages, cultural celebrations and funerals of people overseas. Participant 3 mentions, 'My mother is currently visiting family across Iran, Iraq and Turkey. It was immensely emotional for everyone involved. There were more than 30 family members gathered to welcome me video calling with them as the phone was passing through different hands.' Or, as Participant 15, a male, puts it, 'it's kind of like they are here' in New Zealand.

Some participants supported the members of their transnational networks over the Iranian earthquake and South Asian floods of 2017. Others persuaded people not to step onto overcrowded boats in the Mediterranean. Some advised and helped finance safe land passage into Europe and provided forms of support as friends and family sought asylum in Germany. These interactions provide a basis for sustained relationships and connections to culture, history and support through means previously not possible – effectively a form of transnational care (Wilding and Baldassar 2018).

As an affective component of well-being, social media provided a distant–near engagement in people's everyday lives that generally reduced the intensity of planned interaction. One participant (12) spoke of how his overseas family would watch him making toast or pancakes, rather than needing to have some sort of deep and meaningful discussion that happened once or twice a year. It essentially created an extension to the living room as a transnational portal:

We live in different places so when we see each other we feel closer. Even though we are in different places and, also, we care more about each other. That's the important thing. As people, we tend to forget things we don't see often. So, seeing each other makes our relationship stronger.

Participant 9 notes how she maintains contact through social media as a way of compressing time and distance. She compares this situation to before she had access to social media:

It reminds me of the good old days when we first arrived here and used to use faxes and letters to communicate. To this day, I feel hurt when I think of a video tape my uncle sent me of my cousins in 1998 and it never arrived. And to think how easy social media now make it to 'see' people live is amazing for me.

In many ways, these interactions are both fleeting and sustained, and they represent marked differences between how refugees use social media. Contact can be exceedingly precarious if online availability is reliant on a working infrastructure, the absence of an ongoing conflict or the affordability of a mobile connection. For some participants, the risks of surveillance are very real and can place them or their transnational networks in jeopardy. Responses to elections, escalations in conflicts and debates in the countries of origin can at times dangerously intertwine the personal and political. Many suspected the presence of spies in their WhatsApp discussion groups or friends on Facebook.

If I say something political on WhatsApp, they [the government] can make it a reason to arrest my friends, my family even. (Participant 2, male)

Yes, we are worried someone may be listening or may be checking Facebook. (Participant 6, male)

When we connect with the people inside Sudan, we try to avoid anything that puts them at risk. (Participant 10, male)

Yet, nearly all the participants knew of innovative ways in which to remain connected and to keep their networks safe. For some, however, concerns about safety and surveillance meant that maintaining contact was extremely limited or non-existent.

### *Local interactions in New Zealand*

Social media also provided a platform for increased interaction with people in New Zealand, but that the forms of the interactions were not uniform highlights both the possibilities and constraints of these virtual spaces. However, all the participants used social media to maintain links with their ethnically or religiously defined communities. Participant 1 spoke of one occasion when she

needed a car seat for a child. And then I posted 'is anyone selling a car seat on my WhatsApp group'. Then just in a minute, there was this to say, 'I have this one' and then one sister [defined as a Muslim sister] said that 'I can bring it to you in 15 minutes'. It's so fast.

There were more than 200 active users of that particular New Zealand-based WhatsApp group. While some acknowledged such interactions as helpful, many also noted that they reduced face-to-face meetings and reshaped the social configurations of community groups. 'Before social media people tried to visit at least weekly. Nowadays, it may be two weeks, three weeks or one month [before] they can meet. But on social media, they meet daily' (Participant 6, male).

It is through these new social and structural conditions that people's encounters take shape. Several participants acknowledged spending between six and eight hours a day on social media, predominantly with transnational networks. For others, social media helped to diversify their locally-based networks, ones that went beyond the social identifiers of ethnicity and religion, thus highlighting the diversification of diversity and the negotiation of it. 'When I came to New Zealand, I had no friends at all but now I have some friends, I found them on Facebook' (Participant 6, male).

Many participants noted that, since they felt different from other New Zealand residents, social media gave them a safer platform on which to engage: as one woman (Participant 3) put it, 'social media has kind of provided that you don't need to go out and meet people. You get in touch with them – hi how are you – it's all done online'.

Others spoke of how social media helped them either meet new friends and/or maintain those friendships through apps such as Facebook and WhatsApp. One woman

(Participant 4) found a sense of belonging that might otherwise have been unavailable to her had she not had access to social media. Though not a Christian, she was heavily involved in church-based activities and acknowledged the role of Facebook as an effective bridge:

I'm in a Christian young adult group so they post me or let me know of anything going on. They just told me 'I'm going to pick you up around this time', where we are going and all this stuff. Or what we're going to do the following Sunday, what we're going to study or what's important happening and all the things. They will let me know on Facebook.

The fleeting interactions on Facebook provide an ongoing sense of belonging that facilitates face-to-face interaction across multiple markers of difference (age, gender, culture, religion and visa status). Others utilize social media to inform resettled refugees outside their ethnic community but living in New Zealand about settlement opportunities and local politics. Participant 10 wrote in his diary that:

I am a member of mini Facebook groups consisting of different communities and we have been discussing the election in New Zealand. ... I encourage people to exercise their voting rights. I provide some links that help them understand their rights. Some people in the refugee community are aware of the backgrounds of the people who are seeking public offices, but the majority have no idea.

Addressing these political issues provided the space people needed to voice their opinions and a site to which they belonged on which they could raise awareness and discuss matters of importance to them. With the exception of one who was very active politically, the other seven women were explicitly non-political in their use of social media. They predominantly used them as platforms for providing transnational care and for creating and sustaining new local social relationships. Many of the males in this study tied their identity and sense of worth to being connected to issues 'back home' and the effective enactment of political life and citizenship from overseas. These dynamics highlight how social media serve as a powerful tool with which to negotiate everyday life at both local and transnational levels.

The transnational and local encounters described here are clearly, for better or worse, relevant to people's opportunities to integrate and to their sense of belonging to particular places. During times of rapid political, technological and social change, such encounters have important ramifications, since digital connectivity and its associated affordances inform the social organization of difference and refugee integration.

### **Discussion: the social organization of difference and social media**

The ubiquity of online connection in many refugee resettlement countries has a powerful influence on the social organization of difference and its associated domains of encounters, configurations and representations. As Vertovec (2015) establishes, these

three domains influence each other at different speeds, which means that the recognition and negotiation of difference is dynamic, relational and contextual.

Social media, in conformity with the demands of superdiversity, now play an increasingly important part in the diversification of difference. As the participants' comments illustrate, on the one hand social media provide opportunities to meet people and take advantage of openings that would otherwise be inaccessible in New Zealand, but on the other hand they also potentially close down other interactions and prospects. While the comments of 15 different participants limit the study to the impact of social media on particular social locations, it is clear that social media is disrupting normative understandings of what refugee integration entails. In the sections below, I consider how online encounters affect the configuration and representation of these domains with a view to outlining their implications for refugee resettlement and integration.

### *Configurations: social media and structural implications*

The various fleeting and sustained interactions in which people engage on social media influence local and transnational structures. Social media are increasingly providing spaces in which individuals and organizations can influence policy deliberations. A focus solely on encounters can detract from the fact that issues such as government policy and institutional support are powerful determinants of the options and pathways towards refugee integration. This points to a need to examine how marginalization, poverty and racism impinge on and pose significant obstacles to integration.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM 2017) acknowledges that settlement experiences are informed by scales of governance that include supranational and global structures, various migration pathways and public policies relating to the labour market, housing and education. The rapid shifts in how people communicate and distribute resources have significant implications for governments, supranational entities and international NGOs. The German government recently launched an app called *Ankommen* (meaning *arrive*) for newly arrived asylum seekers and the IOM now has the *MigApp*, which links migrants to important information pertaining to their safety, facilitates a government interface and collects anonymized data. The Red Cross and Red Crescent have developed an app called *Trace a Face* to reunite separated families. There are apps that help protect people's identities, that provide medical advice, and that give information about where to access support and resources. Thus, people's mobilities and forced migration pathways do not happen by chance – they are structured, reinforced and renegotiated through online configurations and encounters.

As Wilding and Baldassar (2018) argue, new social and demographic configurations necessitate rethinking the roles of proximal and distant networks. Social media facilitate the new interactions that provide the portal through which people provide care. The data in this study (and in others) clearly show that remaining connected is essential to well-being. It is as important as having access to food and water. What was interesting in this study was that, while asking all participants about their internet plans and what they paid for it monthly, none of them expressed this as a concern – it was a basic need, much like paying one's water or electric bill.

Several writers have noted that transnationalism can provide an ‘enduring solution’ to refugees by connecting the 1 per cent of those who have resettled to the 99 per cent of those who have not (Van Hear 2002). Social media can play a critical role in this solution by supporting new social structures that intersect with geographical place. They can thus create new sites of belonging. Governments must consider the opportunities and implications inherent in refugees’ ongoing connections with transnational networks. The need for and frequency of digital interactions signal the potential for resettlement programmes to resource and assist access to online networks (within and beyond national borders) to improve settlement outcomes.

There are caveats, however, in that such an approach can result in people avoiding civic and social engagements in their country of resettlement. Social media can affect family relationships in that individualized screens and platforms often reduce the amount of interaction between people sharing the same physical space. Moreover, the scope of governments and powerful institutions to use these platforms for surveillance and potential oppression highlights the dangers of an increasingly connected world.

Finally, since most everyday interactions and transactions tend to occur online, people who are not connected become increasingly left behind. In this sense, the digital divide is a new form of poverty in that it excludes some people from vital information and openings, including access to the labour market, transnational interaction, public perceptions of integration, and contact with geographical places. Downsides also include concerns about trafficking, radicalization, surveillance and confidentiality. Despite such worries, it is clear that social media will continue to shape configurations within, and beyond, national borders.

#### *Representations: concepts, images and discourses*

Whereas the impact of social media on these configurations has been relatively slow, the prolific outpouring of representations of the so-called refugee ‘crisis’ has had far-reaching effects. It is abundantly clear that the discourses and images communicated through Twitter handles, Facebook feeds, Instagram hashtags and various other platforms exert incredible power in the dissemination of particular ideas and discourses about refugees, integration, safety and security. These representations can be shared instantly and quickly reach large groups of people, which have extensive influences on the domains of both encounters and the configurations.

Social media provide a forum in which people can quickly establish opinions as ‘fact’ with little to no evidence – fake news, sensationalized political commentary and voyeuristic media portrayals influence refugees’ interactions and opportunities to engage with civic society. Quite apart from their impact on people’s daily encounters with neighbours, employers, teachers and others, the structural implications of these associated outcomes also inform the opportunities that refugees have to participate in civic life in terms of work, health, education, language acquisition and so on. Frequent representations of refugees as *swarms* or *floods* inform legislative agendas and shift popular views of them from being ‘at risk’ to being ‘a risk’ (Bogen and Marlowe 2015). As numerous countries continue to securitize and externalize their borders in

attempts to protect their citizens, this trend informs national debates about whether to welcome or deter people seeking asylum (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Tan 2017).

However, refugees can also engage with representations in response to racism and provide counter-narratives to such politics of fear. Social media can provide a 'digital escape' (Gifford and Wilding 2013) and create a site on which to communicate and embrace alternative forms of belonging. This highlights the extent to which refugees' perceptions of hostility and/or acceptance in the new environment (by government, host communities, political commentary and local and national media discourses) can influence how they use social media. Numerous examples now exist that illustrate how protest and activism during the Arab Spring was communicated through social media (Gerbaudo 2012) and more broadly through online campaigns such as #HelpCalais and #RefugeesWelcome that became social movements responding to the European refugee crisis (Barisione et al. 2017). In New Zealand, *Doing Our Bit* and #Welcome500Now are national campaigns that played an important role in influencing the government's recent announcement to increase its annual refugee quota to 1500 people starting in 2020 (Stephens 2018).

As encounters and representations occur online, it is increasingly apparent that those with whom we engage are much like us. The 'friends' on a Facebook profile are simply that because of shared points of interest, identity and values. It can mean a loss of encounters with those whose different opinions narrow the scope of debate and awareness of particular issues. Although Web 2.0 promised to democratize information, we are increasingly seeing how it can silo interaction and limit awareness of alternative perspectives and understandings (Lindgren 2017). Such trends and practices have significant ramifications for the social organization of difference. Social media has the potential to facilitate interaction, establish policy directions and inform everyday understandings related to the diversification of difference. It also has the power to shut such down possibilities.

The speed with which social media can communicate such representations is a demonstration of its power and potential to influence the social organization of difference. The associated lag of encounters and configurations may be shortened or extended – at times incredibly. It highlights how these tools can shine light on oppression and raise human rights issues from local to transnational levels to increase understanding, galvanize humanitarian responses and enhance settlement opportunities. It also provides a site where intolerance, false information and exclusionary forces can quickly coalesce to create places of non-belonging that reinforce hegemonic structures, racist ideologies and oppressive practices. Thus, it is clear that social media has the potential to decrease and increase significantly the distance and associated lag between the domains of encounters, configurations and representations. Correspondingly, social media has the power to influence integration outcomes.

### **Conclusion: possibilities and constraints**

Digital technologies and social media are reshaping how refugees settle and integrate in new host societies. As the UNHCR (2016) acknowledges, mobile connectivity is

rapidly increasing in sites of displacement, though unevenly. This gives refugees separated by geographic distance unheralded opportunities to reconnect through text, audio and video-based interaction. Ongoing improvements in the global accessibility, usability and affordability of the communication devices further influence settlement outcomes and experiences – for refugees and the receiving societies and on local and transnational scales. These rapidly evolving technologies with ever-increasing reach can effectively enable and hinder possibilities for integration, transnational connection and sites of belonging. The social organization of difference provides a theoretical framework in which to interrogate this dynamic digital environment.

As previously discussed, since the participants in this study are well educated and proficient in English, the digital divide is less likely to affect them. While it is clear that society is moving more and more to online platforms to access information, maintain relationships and identify opportunities, it is vital to recognize that social media are not uniformly available or embraced. The possibilities alongside the limitations that this reality presents provide an important reminder that the diversification of difference requires an analysis of the new modes and sites of social identification and opportunity. It is imperative that research, policy and practice respond to these rapidly changing technological, social and political environments. It is also important that research is sensitive to the diversification of difference across multiple social locations (gender, age, ethnicity, education, visa status, labour market distribution, and so forth) as social media provides pathways to transcend difference, and at other times, provides a platform to effectively reinforce and reify it. As global networks become accessible and available into everyday livelihoods, this has profound implications for the social organization of difference and refugee resettlement.

While maintaining contact with transnational networks is not a new phenomenon for refugees, the speed and scope through which social media facilitate such interaction continue to accelerate. Although online interactions afford new possibilities, they also present risks in terms of confidentiality, safety, surveillance and people's commitments to local places and relationships. Despite these caveats, social media continue to shape people's interactions, networks, sociability and basically how they engage in civic life. These contexts inform how social media inculcate transnational networks into everyday relationships, opportunities and the negotiation of power.

Since refugee settlement is becoming increasingly complex, I have stressed the importance of looking at the accounts of social actors against dominant discourses of forced migration. Yet, integration remains a normative feature of most refugee resettlement plans, which rarely transcend the national imagination. Until such thinking and its associated discourses change, policies, practices and public debates will fail to capture the reality that refugees maintain connections and lives both 'here' and 'there'.

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