"Information is like your daily bread": The role of media and telecommunications in the life of refugees in Israel

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Abstract

Interviews, site visits and observations are used in this study to describe the information needs of the asylum seeker and refugee community in Israel, utilizing Taylor's (1991) concept of identifying "information use environments" (IUE), whose elements are people, their settings, their problems, and the solutions they find for their problems. A detailed analysis of the findings and framing them within the components of Taylor's model allow the creation of a framework for improving the refugees' situation in terms of their information needs. The study identified that asylum seekers and refugees in Israel have constructed a media environment based on their self-identification as "others". They created personal and technological circles to address their information needs, broadly divided into three types: personal, institutional, and spatial. Within the public sphere, they erected Internet cafés, their own "post office", and their own media. Within the private sphere, they acquired electronic media that address many of their needs. We conclude that since refugees are situated in society's least advantaged position, attending to their information needs should be a policy priority of their host society.

Keywords: Refugees, information needs, ICT, Israel, distributive justice

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Introduction

Survival in contemporary Western society requires the ability to access and utilize information, which is provided over technology-based communication systems. The inability to access information and communication technologies (ICTs), more often than not described as "the digital divide," has become one of the most studied phenomena impacting information policy design (i.e. Hargittai, 2002; Srinuan & Bohlin, 2011; Talukdar & Gauri, 2011; Van Dijk, 2005, 2009; Van Dijk & Hacker, 2003; Wei, Teo, Chan & Tan, 2011). Yet, "the concept of a binary 'digital divide' does not adequately reflect the real impact on communities of inclusion or exclusion from increasingly complex information networks" (Friedland, Napoli, Ognyanova, Weill & Wilson, 2012: iv). Indeed, measuring levels of exclusion caused by the disparity of communication services is not an easy task (Dailey, Bryne, Powell, Karaganis & Chung, 2010). A better method will be to identify the information needs of marginalized communities. Doing so would be motivated by the understanding of ICTs as a means rather than an end, thereby overturning the understanding that had typified the first years of "digital divide" studies, and in particular, the most influential studies that had defined the field, such as the "falling through the net" studies of the United States' National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA, 2000).

This study is an attempt to understand the information needs of an excluded and marginalized community in present-day Israel, as well as present-day global society, the refugees and asylum seeker community.[1] In order to do so, we utilize Taylor's (1991) concept of identifying "information use environments" (IUEs). Taylor (1991) classified groups of citizens based on the information environments they create for themselves. These environments, he claims, contain the following elements: *people, their setting, their problems, and the solutions they found for their problems.* While Taylor's model was designed initially to describe the media use environments of different types of professionals, in recent years it has also been utilized for understanding the information environments of "disconnected" communities (Agada, 1999; Hersberger, Murray & Sokoloff, 2006).

In this study we use interviews, visits to homes, and observations in public settings, such as Internet cafés, public parks and streets, to describe the information use environments of refugees and asylum seekers in Israel.

Information seeking and information use environments (IUEs)

Identifying the information needs of vulnerable and marginalized communities stems from the understanding that information and communication technologies serve as means for acquiring information. While one may see this determination as trivial, that unfortunately has not always been the case with regards to the development of information and communication technologies since the mid-1990s, and in particular with regards to the identification of the digital divide. Early

literature in which the term "digital divide" had focused on "the gap separating those individuals who have access to new forms of information technology from those who do not" (Gunkel, 2003), and was "based on a binary classification of Internet use by only considering whether someone is or is not an Internet user" (Hargittai, 2002). However, the "first-level digital divide" (Wei et al., 2011) made way for more complex understandings of the divide and its meaning, according to which, it is information needs and not technological needs that are at the base of the gap, and access alone cannot provide those on the wrong side of the gap with all solutions to their needs.

In order to address the information needs of one marginalized community – the African refugees and asylum seekers in Israel – this study adapts Taylor's (1991) concept of "information use environments" (IUE). IUEs are the "set of elements which affect the availability, access to, and use of information by a group" (Agada, 1999: 74). In order to classify these groups, Taylor (1991) uses a distinction based on the information environments these groups create for themselves: their media use, social networks, attitudes toward new technology, education, risk taking, and innovation. He identified four building-blocks that determine these environments: (a) "the people" - which is determined by how group members define themselves; (b) "the problems" - which are identified by how group-members define their needs; (c) "the setting" - – which combines different factors such as the needed information, existing technology, public infrastructure, educational background, and social network; (d) and "the solution" – which is determined by how "the people" utilize the "setting" they are in, in order to find a "resolution" to what has been identified as their common "problem". In recent years, Taylor's model has been also used for understanding the information environments of "disconnected" communities, and served as a tool to assess their fragile situation in the networked society (Agada, 1999; Hersberger et al., 2006).

Taylor's (1991) model is based on the assumption that "an individual citizen's ability to cope with a given need is no better than the sources and solutions available to him" (Dervin, 1976 p. 35). However, once people identify their information needs, they try to seek new information that may eventually help them answer their needs (Choo, 1998; Detlor, 2003). This leads us to focus on what the literature has determined as "critical information needs" of communities (Friedland et al., 2012). During the daily lives of people, these needs tend to be perceived as crucial. Indeed, all individuals have needs that are an outcome of their personal traits, which may be influenced by a plethora of affiliations and identifications, along with gender, socio-economic, religious, language or sexual orientation.

This study explores the IUEs of the refugee and asylum-seeking community in Israel in the early 2010s. Emanating from the IUE tradition, the present study addressed this community as an information-seeking community, a community that defines itself also along the lines of its information-seeking behavior.

Refugees' status in Israel

The current refugee crisis, according to the UN refugee agency (the UNHCR), is the worst since World War II,[2] as almost sixty million people have been forcefully displaced from their home countries by 2015.[3] Israel is among the host countries facing this crisis. Until the end of 2014, Israel has recognized only 330 asylum seekers as refugees. However, as a favorite destination for Eritrean and Sudanese groups, Israel currently deals with far larger numbers of "life-seeking" people (Sabar, 2015) within its borders.

The flow of refugees and asylum seekers into Israel is a recent phenomenon that can be traced back to the genocide in Darfur at the turn of the 21st century. While their exact number is difficult to ascertain, as the data regarding this issue in Israel is partial and contested (Kritzman-Amir, 2015), we know that a trickle of Darfuri refugees started making their way through Sudan and Egypt to Israel in the mid-2000s. Within a few years, their numbers had grown dramatically. Since 2007 a constant flow of asylum seekers, mainly from Sudan and Eritrea, arrived from Israel's southern border with Egypt. According to the UNHCR statistics, by 2015, Israel was hosting 32,700 asylum seekers from Eritrea (in comparison, a total of 81,100 Eritreans are hosted in all the European countries combined) and 13,551 people from Sudan.[4] Mostly, these were Eritreans and Sudanese who submitted asylum requests in Israel, only a handful of which have been processed.

In most cases, Israel rejects the refugee status claims of these people. In 2010, for example, only six asylum claims were recognized, and only eight in 2011, out of 3,700 cases reviewed. Instead, Israel refers to these people as "infiltrators" (Yaron, Hashimshony-Yaffe & Campbell, 2013), as in the 2015 official tally.[5] Indeed, this loaded term bears consequences for those seeking asylum in Israel. When this term is employed by Israeli officials and is heard frequently in the public discourse, it highlights the potential existential threat that these infiltrators impose on Israeli society, as it connotes the memory of the Palestinian "infiltrators" of the 1950s (Ram & Yacobi, 2012). As such, the term "infiltrators" de-legitimizes the asylum seekers' presence in Israel and constructs a public attitude that justifies their maltreatment and their lack of refugees' rights (Kritzman-Amir, 2015; Harel, 2015). It has been claimed that the "infiltrators" rhetoric influences even the Israeli law system and serves as the justification for the asylum seekers' incarceration in local jails and designated "camps" (Berman, 2015).

Yet, despite Israel's refusal to define asylum seekers as refugees and despite the discourse regarding their situation in Israel, they are not being deported out of the country. Israel grants asylum seekers within its borders with a "collective protection". This unique form of protection should be and has been criticized, as it guarantees only a minimal set of rights in comparison to those who may be recognized as refugees and thus entitled to a larger set of rights (Kritzman-Amir, 2009). However, it is at least a minimal protection. Israel refrains from deporting those who arrived within its borders back to their homelands or to other destinations where they may face a

threat to their lives due to the "non-refoulement" protection anchored in the Refugee Convention of 1951, which Israel joined in 1954[6] (Natan, 2010, 2011; Kritzman-Amir, 2009, 2015). Yet, by denying these people the rights they may be entitled to if they are recognized as refugees, Israel maintains their marginalization and exclusion in society, imposing on them the identity of eternal "others" in Israeli society (Kritzman-Amir, 2009).

Paradoxically, Israel, a country founded by and for immigrants, is the only Western-style democracy with no official immigration policy to speak of (Avineri, Orgad & Rubinstein, 2009). This is not a coincidence or a result of legislative oversight, but rather the outcome of a policy, which until the 1990s went hand-in-hand both with the state's ideological credo and with the reality in which virtually the only migration to Israel was of Jews, a migration considered as repatriation and governed by the Law of Return of 1950 (Rubinstein, 2006). Immigration of non-Jews, as such, was never a legal option, and the "immigration law" introduced in the Knesset in 1951 was subsequently named the Entry to Israel Law, concluding that Israel is a "repatriation country" and not an "immigration country" (A.P.A 1644/05). The arrival of hundreds of thousands of "unexpected" guests-who-came-to-stay over the 1990s, migrant workers first, and then refugees, thus became both a practical and a legal challenge for Israeli society in general and for policymakers in particular.

The basic assumption of policymakers seems to have been that the presence of refugees would be temporary. For this reason, the development of social and cultural services befitting their unique needs has been lagging. Much of the burden of tending to the needs of these *de facto* residents of the state has fallen on a growing civil society constituency, community efforts and individual humanitarian initiatives (Kritzman-Amir, 2015). However, questions regarding media and information in relation to refugees and their situation in Israel are at the margins of the discussion regarding this community's situation in Israel.

Refugees, media, and information

The refugee situation worldwide and in Israel is strongly connected to media and communication technologies, as well as to information that refugees acquire or seek to acquire in their journeys and host states. Current refugees arriving in Europe by different routes and means have been defined as "Facebook refugees"[8] or "digital refugees"[9]. For this generation of refugees, it has been claimed, a smartphone is among "the most crucial item [they] carry"[10] during their journey. Indeed, the reliance on information and communication technologies and the relatively high level of connectivity that characterizes the contemporary transnational movement has even been considered as one of the only "upsides" of the refugee tragedy.[11]

Studies on refugees' media use are still limited. Yet, some scholars claim that the distinction between migrants' and refugees' media use is not that significant, thus one can learn from previous studies about migrants on the situation of current refugees (Felton, 2015; Wall, Campbell & Janbek,

2015). According to this corpus of work, the media play a major role in the integration and disintegration processes of different migrant groups in their host societies (Kymlicka, 2007; Silverstone & Georgiou, 2005; Khvorostianov, Elias & Nimrod, 2012; Elias & Lemish, 2009). Studies of media and migration in the past have made the claim that immigrants use mass media in order to socialize in their new environment; as an emotional shelter; as substitutes for the lack of communication with local peers; as assisting in the process of inter-generational cultural transmission; and as sites that enable immigrants' identity exploration processes (Elias & Lemish, 2009). At the same time, these mass media often exclude immigrants "through stereotypical and alienating images" (Silverstone & Georgiou, 2005: 434), thus promoting a sense of public resentment towards them. Similar processes are being observed in the case of contemporary refugees as well (Lechler, Bos & Vliegenthart, 2015; Ihlen & Thorbjørnsrud, 2014).

While traditional mass media may frame the discourse about refugees in their host countries, contemporary "new media" propose different capabilities and opportunities for distinctive categories of migrants, among them refugees (Georgiou, 2006; Hanafi, 2005; Kama & Malka, 2013; Khvorostianov et al., 2012; Elias & Lemish, 2009). New media "replace the traditional media in the process of immigrants' cultural adaption and social integration" (Elias & Lemish, 2009: 3). These new technologies are a source for migrants to gain information regarding their host societies; they are used as tools for social empowerment; and they enable communication with native-born peers as well as with friends and family from the former homeland. In addition, new media create a safe place for adjusting to new social roles and performing new and hybrid migrant identities (Elias & Lemish, 2009: 5). New opportunities enabled by new information and communication devices created an "identity prosthesis" (Kama & Malka, 2013) for immigrants, as they can at the same time take part in their new society and maintain the sense of being at their native lands "as if migration has never been performed" (p. 382).

A few studies have explored how refugees use new information and communication technologies available to them. In the Israeli case it has been found that asylum seekers use cellular phones in order to connect with friends and family that support them in their first days in Israel. When they can afford it, asylum seekers buy televisions, computers, laptops and Internet access to their own accommodations. In addition, asylum seekers in Israel use satellite TV which enables them to watch different channels broadcasting in different languages. This complex media use maintains the sense of asylum seekers' "imagined community" even when they live marginally in exile (Antaby-Yemini, 2015). In Australia, for another example, refugees use contemporary media in order to communicate with other people, to find information necessary for their stay in a new environment, and to follow the news from their home countries (Felton, 2015). Indeed, applications representing contemporary media's new capabilities, such as "interactive city maps, websites, public transport journey planners and applications that provide local up-to-the-minute information,"

(p. 13) are used extensively to better the life of the refugees in their new home. Another Australian study reveals that refugees rely mainly on mobile technologies, using their mobile phones when seeking information and answering their daily communication needs (Hebbani & Van Vuuren, 2015).

However, while empowering refugees in their new environments, contemporary communication technologies have certain downsides. In Italy, Eritrean refugees living in local shelters expressed the fear of being monitored by the Eritrean regime from which they had escaped. According to these refugees, the repressive regime can still harm their friends and relatives who remain in Eritrea while tracking the refugees' media use even outside the country (Opas & McMurray, 2015). Similarly, Syrian refugees living in the Za'atari Camp in Jordan, one of the largest refugee camps in the world, while having almost universal access to at least one mobile phone, which is mostly a smartphone (Maitland & Xu, 2015), have expressed the same fear of being under the Syrian regime's surveillance, and of the potential harm that could be inflicted upon their friends and families who have stayed behind (Maitland & Xu, 2015; Wall et al., 2015).

These examples demonstrate that while refugees are connected and may very well use new communication opportunities available to them as a result of the unique characteristics of contemporary media (Schejter & Tirosh, 2015), they suffer from "information precarity" (Wall et al., 2015). In this fragile state, while being connected to, and taking part in, the contemporary media ecosystem, refugees' access to varied information is insecure, unstable, and undependable, leading to potential threats to their well-being" (Wall et al., 2015: 2). This information precarity is realized in five different 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" (Wall et al., 2015: 2). These forms of precarity demonstrate the urgent need to find out what are the information needs of refugees in Israel and other places around the world, and more importantly, how do refugees construct their information environments while trying to answer these needs. This study contributes to this conversation.

The study

In order to lay the groundwork for understanding the information needs of the refugees and asylum seekers in Israel, we conducted interviews with 14 asylum seekers and refugees. Eight were from Eritrea, three from Nigeria and three from South Sudan. Some of the interviews were held in English, some in Hebrew, and some in Tigrinya, with a simultaneous translation to English provided by one of the refugees. Most interviews were taped, but some of the interviewees refused to be taped, in which case the interviewer took notes during the interview. The interviews took place in asylum seekers' apartments, in the offices of the African Refugee Development Center (ARDC),

and in public spaces. All but one, which took place in Jerusalem, were held in Tel Aviv. All but two of the interviewees were men. Indeed, the asylum-seeker community is extremely cautious and suspecting, and women in particular were reluctant to cooperate with the researchers. The two women we did interview had already established their legal status as refugees, and were thus less apprehensive and fearful. The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol based on Taylor's (1991) model.

For background data, interviews were held also with social activists who work with the refugee and asylum seeker communities. A series of visits were held to sites where refugees and asylum seekers reside, as well as to their public spaces: parks, Internet cafes, restaurants, and the offices of civil society groups. Consequently, the four elements of the unique information use environment (IUE) of the asylum seekers were established – people, setting, problems, and resolution.

Indeed, in order to learn about the refugees and asylum seekers' needs, one needs to visit them and spend time with them. The refugee and asylum seeker population is not homogenous, yet if there is one trait we found common among them, it was their general distrust and fear of any "official" meeting. As such, over a period of a few months we developed trust with a small number of community leaders, which in turn allowed us to visit their homes, attend gatherings and meetings, eat at makeshift eateries they opened in the south side of Tel Aviv, sit at Internet cafés, and frequent other locales in which they congregate, such as parks. We thus describe our work as consisting of visits (to homes and gathering places), observations (in public places), and interviews, which took place at both homes, cafés, restaurants, and the offices of NGOs devoted to assisting these communities. We also walked up and down Neve Sha'anan Street in Tel Aviv, the center of refugee life, numerous times, to map the street's businesses, and identify the types of businesses that operate there. In particular, we looked for businesses that commercially address what can be defined as the refugees' media and information needs.

The interviews were analyzed using conventional qualitative analysis techniques: they were read and reread, and common themes were identified. However, since the study was informed by Taylor's (1991) IUE theory, once the themes were recognized, they were organized for analysis within the four realms by which Taylor describes IUEs, and as delineated above: people, problems, settings and solutions. In particular, we focused on problems that fell within what the literature (Friedland et al., 2012) describes as "critical information needs", which are perceived to be crucial to the daily lives of people. As a result, we did not look into other personal needs, such as entertainment.

Information-seeking behavior among refugees and asylum seekers in Israel

Utilizing Taylor's (1991) four elements of IUEs, we now turn to describe how the information-seeking behavior of refugees in Israel has evolved based on our interviews, site visits and observations.

1. People

When describing themselves in the interviews, the interviewees often started off by describing what they were not: Israeli citizens. Indeed, the refugees and the asylum seekers are well aware that they are not welcome in their host society, and even within their information-seeking behavior, this sense of "strangeness" within the Israeli social fabric stands out. There was definitely a tendency among the interviewees to define themselves as a "group" with special identifiable and common needs. Interviewees saw themselves as "refugees", as "Eritrean", and so forth. Terms such as "people like us" were widely used as well as references to their status as "refugees" and to the black color of their skin as an identifier of commonality. The common experience is a natural bond among members of the community. As one Eritrean refugee said, "On the way you make a lot of friends because you have the same life."

Information seeking within the community takes place within defined linkages to sources (Dervin, 1976). The first linkage is human rather than technological. It includes members of the immediate group with which the individual identifies. "I ask people, especially ask people whom I know, they have an idea what I want," said an Eritrean refugee who has been living in Israel for nine months. "Friends, they will tell me where people will help," added a refugee who had been living in Israel for three years.

Accessing other people to acquire information is thus the first choice for members of this community. This, however, does not imply that media are not a source of information. It can be said that for lack of immediate first-hand access to the media of information, for whatever reason (physical or intellectual capacity), a new kind of "two-step flow" of information takes place: from the media to "opinion leaders", and from them to the consumer of information. The "leadership" role here though, unlike the original model developed in the 1950s (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) is determined by the physical access to information and communication technologies, which provides the newly-designated "leaders" with access to information, which they in turn disseminate to those who lack access. Indeed, the original "two-step flow" study is still extremely influential in communication studies (i.e. Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009; Case, Johnson, Andrews, Allard & Kelly, 2004). It has been found to have explanatory power in online public forums (Choi, 2015) and determined as still valid in digital platforms (Hilbert, Vásquez, Halpern, Valenzuela & Arriagada, 2016). Weimann and Brosius (2016) identify the relationship between traditional and new media in the information flow as a "modern version of the two-step flow" (p. 28).

The "opinion leaders" in our case, as in the original study, are specifically designated by the information in which they are considered to be experts. However, their prominence is also determined by their access to technology. The refugees and asylum seekers tend to point to their local "friends" as those who bridge the information gap for them. While they maintain contact with family members, whether back home or in other countries, these relatives cannot be of assistance in their integration into Israeli society.

In a previous study (Schejter, 2012), a relationship was identified between migrant workers from the post-Soviet bloc and immigrants from the same region, even though the two communities do not share the same affinity with the host Israeli society; the former are considered as temporary, whereas the latter – who have Jewish roots – immigrate to stay. Interestingly, however, no strong relationship was identified between Eritrean refugees, who speak Tigrinya, and the small portion of Jewish-Ethiopians who speak the same language.[12] There could be a number of reasons for this lack of communication despite the common language, not the least being the fact that Ethiopian Jews – unlike the FSU Jews – are considerably less absorbed into Israeli society socially and economically, and their ability to assist the refugees is consequently limited. We were exposed though at some point to business relationships between Eritrean refugees and Jewish-Ethiopian immigrants, which circled around importing goods (mostly traditional clothes) from Eritrea to be used by the refugees in Israel. The extent of such business relations beyond this particular angle is not known.

2. Problems

The interviewees often brought up their information needs independently, without being prompted by the questionnaire. A South Sudanese refugee said that "I don't feel I have all the information I need," while an Eritrean refugee responded, when asked what his needs were, "The only thing which I need is information … information is like your daily bread you know, it is important." In the interviews, a number of "information needs", or "problems" associated with an information need were brought up repeatedly. In fact, the interviewees themselves did not always refer to these needs as "problems," although their identification of them as such did emerge throughout the conversation. These needs can be divided into three categories. The first, "personal/survival," includes information about family members in their country of origin and information about how to make a living. For the refugees, this was both a legal issue and a matter of livelihood. The second, the "institutional," includes information about their status and rights as migrants in general and as refugees/political-asylum seekers in particular, and their other needs for government or municipal services. The third, the "spatial/orientational" category, includes language, information about spatial orientation and local customs, and information about "what is happening" in Israel, in their country of origin, and in the world in general.

Mostly, the length of their stay in Israel plays a major role in determining the type of information the interviewees were seeking, in defining their problems, in describing their setting, and in their information-seeking behavior, yet a few exceptions should be made. For example, with the "personal/survival" type of problems, issues of connectivity may arise either in Israel or in their country of origin, where their family members may not have access to a telephone or a computer, a challenge that has little connection, if any, to the length of stay in Israel.

With regards to "institutional" needs, the constant regulatory changes governing their stay in Israel have been cause for much confusion and personal trepidation. An Eritrean refugee said that "we are in a very, uhm, like undetermined situation, so we want to hear something from the government every minute, every time." Another Eritrean refugee, who at the time of the interview had been spending nine months in Israel, was unaware of how to obtain a driver's license.

Even with regards to the "spatial/orientational" challenges, while many of the interviewees do acquire a working knowledge of Hebrew as time passes, and do get better acquainted with the geography of the land, means of transportation, and customs, their conversational level of Hebrew is not always sufficient. For example, in the summer of 2011, the public bus system in Tel Aviv underwent a major overhaul of routes. Information about the specific changes was handed out in bus stations, but it was all printed in Hebrew. "Everything is in *Ivrit* [Hebrew]," complained a Nigerian refugee.

Some of the interviewees' information needs – whether personal, institutional or spatial/orientational – emanate from their physical "disconnectedness" from their geographical and cultural roots. Another aspect of cultural "strangeness" came to the fore at an unusual meeting held in a park adjacent to a neighborhood where both Israelis and refugees reside. The two groups met to discuss how to bridge cultural differences, and the Jewish Israelis complained that the refugees had held a picnic in the park on Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement), a day of fasting observed by virtually the entire Jewish-Israeli public sphere. The refugees explained that no one had alerted them to the fact that this was a holy day for the Jews. The park was empty of people, they observed, and it seemed like the perfect day to hold a party.

A recurring theme that emerged in the interviews was the need for news. It was probably the most widespread commonality across the spectrum of people interviewed. There seemed to be correlations between the length of stay in Israel, as well as between the circumstances in the home country, and between the types of news they consumed. A South Sudanese refugee reported watching Al Jazeera on satellite television because it carried news about his home country. A visit to his apartment (shared with other Sudanese refugees) revealed a TV set that was permanently turned on, with a live satellite feed from home.

3. Settings

In a country of 8.3 million residents, the presence of nearly a quarter of a million temporary residents (migrant workers are counted in this tally as well), comprising approximately 3 percent of the total population, is not trivial. The non-Israelis are even more prominent in specific parts of the country where they tend, as immigrants often do, to congregate and form self-supporting communities (Dayan, 1998; Sabar, 2015) In Eilat, the city closest to the Israeli-Egyptian border, and particularly in the depressed neighborhoods located in the southern part of Tel-Aviv – Israel's commercial and business capital – a new underclass has emerged, with the working-class Israelis who had occupied these dilapidated neighborhoods until quite recently replaced by African newcomers.

The public spaces

The communication and information needs of these communities are thus as visible in the public sphere as are the members of this community themselves. Communication services are central along the street of Neve Sha'anan, where many refugees and asylum seekers live and gather. An independent and unique "Post office" was available for this community, along with a few Internet cafés that serve their communication needs.

- **Neve Sha'anan**

Site visits to the former central bus station in Tel Aviv, which has been transformed in recent years into a "pocket of gathering" of migrant workers and refugees (Kama, 2008), have revealed the community's high dependency on media. The business and physical environment seems to be adjusting to their needs. The main street of the former bus station, Neve Sha'anan Street, was turned into a pedestrian walkway after the new bus station, built a couple of city blocks away, was inaugurated in the 1990s, as part of an urban renewal plan designed to gentrify the decaying neighborhood. But the influx of migrant workers, which coincided with the planned transformation of this neighborhood, upended these plans, as the inexpensive and crumbling dwellings began attracting a new underclass. The refugees who arrived later joined in to turn this former haven of crime, drugs and prostitution into a bustling ethnic neighborhood, albeit poor and derelict.

Perhaps the most telling sign of the transformation that took place in this neighborhood are the businesses that have moved in. For decades, Neve Sha'anan Street was known as Tel Aviv's discount shoe mecca. Site visits to this new hub for foreigners revealed that the primary business on the streets these days is communications services and communications-related products. Out of the 145 storefronts on the street in June 2011, including closed stores, 24 (16.5%) were either Internet cafés or shops that sold mobile phones and phone cards. Four major Israeli mobile operators – Pelephone, Cellcom, Orange and HOT – had stores on the street, but only six shoe stores remained on the street by that time.

Large television sets can today be found in the ethnic restaurants that dot Neve Sha'anan Street. While it is rare to see a sign identifying these eateries as such, it is common for them to hang flags of the countries from where the dishes originated and where most of the patrons of these modest establishments seem to originate. It was also common to find people sitting at these restaurants with the channel from their home country being broadcast on a television set in the background.

Another indication of the centrality of communication technologies in the lives of the migrants – in particular the need to communicate with relatives in their countries of origin – came at an Independence celebration sponsored by one of the mobile communication brands that operated at the time in Israel. It was held in a large event hall in Tel Aviv on July 10, 2011, a day after South Sudan gained its independence, and six months before most South Sudanese refugees were deported back home. Balloons carrying the corporate colors of the mobile operator were interspersed with the green, red and black decorations depicting the South Sudanese national colors. The culmination of this fusion of the corporate, the national, and the personal, came in the form of cardboard flags attached to wooden sticks, with a South Sudanese flag printed on one side and the logo of the prepaid service's brand on the other.

- **The "Post office"**

On the corner of Neve Sha'anan and Salomon streets, kitty-cornered from the now demolished platforms of the old bus station, the refugee community established its own post office, which also served as an Internet café and sold phone cards. Lists of people who have received mail were taped from the inside of the display window that faces the street. It was common to find refugees approaching this window to see whether a letter or a package awaits them inside. For lack of a permanent address, and wary of having their mail handled through a "poste restante" service at the official post office, the refugees phoned or wrote home to provide the address of this facility to their relatives. Mail traffic, however, was small, while the traffic around the store and the number of people walking up to the posted lists suggested that many more were expecting to receive mail than actually did receive one. The owners reported that only about 10 pieces of mail on average were received per month. The long list on the front window suggested that mail recipients did not hurry to pick up their pieces of mail. While this is a unique form of a private attempt to address the refugees' communication needs through making postal services available, it was only a temporary solution and mostly non-sustainable, as it lacked any state support and was not connected to the Israeli national post services.

- **Internet cafés**

Internet cafés on Neve Sha'anan Street operate as businesses. Some are nationally or ethnically identified (with flags), while others have different sorts of appeal. An Eritrean refugee, who had

been living in Israel for three-and-a-half years and owned and operated an Internet café for the previous year, was initially reluctant to share information about his business.[13] He did disclose, however, that he had purchased the computers installed inside the café with money he had saved by working 15-16-hour days. The salary from one month of work, he said, allowed him to buy one computer. There are a dozen computer stations in the café, and they all have web browsers and the "netTALK" long-distance calling application installed in them. In addition to Internet services, the store sells phone cards, mobile phones, music discs and DVDs of movies from the refugees' home countries. It also provides fax, photocopying and printing services.

An Israeli friend of the proprietor did the installation work at the center, apparently for free. The proprietor maintained total control of the computers through a "mother computer" and supervision of the widely popular netTALK application, but he did not keep any statistics on usage. Still, he observed that usage peaks at the end of the workday, between 5 pm and about 10 pm and that the busiest days of the week were the weekends. Interestingly, for working refugees, the day of rest is Saturday (the Jewish Sabbath), which makes business heavier on that day. Business also tends to be heavier on or right after the ninth of each month, which for many workers is payday.

Only one computer station at the store had a *Microsoft* "Office" suite, since there is very little to no demand for such services, according to the owner. Customers needing printing services bring the documents they need to be printed stored already on a flash drive. Many of the customers do not know how to access the Internet, and the owner helps them when they first come, "if I have time," as he puts it. He also sets up appointments for them for free tutoring. The charge for users is by the hour and has gone down from NIS 10 to NIS 8 "because there is competition."[14] On netTALK, the charge is NIS 1 per minute. Customers use the computers to access web services such as social networks like: Messenger and Facebook, and other services like web chat and Email. "Mostly," he says, "they use it for communication." Indeed, while our study focuses on the community's *information* needs, it is clear that they have equally important *communication* needs, which the IUE theoretical framework does not address.

The private space

In the same way that "problems" often reflect the length of stay in Israel, so does the technological setting. For most of the interviewees, the longer they have been living in Israel, the more technological capabilities they have acquired, although there are exceptions to this rule as well. A Nigerian refugee explained that "because we are here to survive, so that is why we don't want to buy." The correlation between length of stay and ICT acquisition is also tied to the purchasing power acquired over time. Some refugees reported receiving ICTs from a landlord or someone described as a "friend" in exchange for payment for monthly usage.

- **Mobile phones**

Overwhelmingly, the first ICT acquired and the one used the most is the mobile phone. An Eritrean refugee said, "The first thing to find is the telephone." A South Sudanese refugee who was put on a bus from Eilat to Tel Aviv after he was caught crossing the border described buying a used mobile phone when the bus stopped in Be'er Sheva for a break during the long ride. One illiterate Eritrean refugee, who had arrived in Israel only the month before our interview, had no phone (nor any other ICT), but being able to read numbers, he was able to use payphones with calling cards to call home. The need for phones was pronounced among refugees already en route to Israel. They reported that in Sudan mobile phone rates were inexpensive and that while traveling through parts of the Sahara (some routes including stints in Libya and Egypt) they could access satellite phones held by smugglers. While many refugees had bought used phones, two Eritrean refugees who had been in Israel for different periods of time sported brand-new smartphones.

Common among all the refugees was the preference for pre-paid mobile phones. The majority had phones on the Partner Communications network, but used a variety of services for international calls, shopping occasionally for the best deal for calls to their home country. Some used payphones for international calls, the mobile cards perceived as "too expensive," in the words of one Nigerian refugee.

- **Radio and television**

The Eritrean refugees had radios or listened to radio over the Internet. One listened to Eritrean news over a service called Radio Assenna (http://assenna.com/) over the Internet. Another listened to the Amharic Israeli radio service (which is part of Reka, Israel Broadcast Authority (IBA) radio service for immigrants and listeners abroad) for both news and music.

Television was available generally to all interviewees. Television sets were present even at some of the more modest refugee apartments visited in Tel Aviv and in Jerusalem. In one case, the television was connected to an external private satellite dish, which provided access to channels not available in packages offered by Israeli operators. In another, the landlord had the apartment connected to the cable system.

Refugees who watched Israeli networks and had gained a working knowledge of Hebrew reported watching Channel 2 news, yet naturally, there was more diversity for those seeking foreign-language news sources. A Nigerian refugee reported watching the following array of English-language programs and channels: the IBA English news program, Middle East Television[15], CNN, and Fox News. Indeed, English is a common language in Nigeria, formerly a British colony. One South Sudanese refugee who had cable service in his apartment watched Al Jazeera in Arabic, as he explained, "because they talk about Sudan." He said he used to watch the BBC but had stopped because "the BBC has become very bad now. It's very business." Another South Sudanese

refugee who had a private satellite dish reported watching South Sudan TV and Ashorooq TV, a private Sudanese satellite channel. He also relayed that he watched the BBC and CNN, and often Channels 2 and 10 on Israeli television. "I like to see the news in Israeli channel," he explained. "If you see the picture of a leader that is talking, you understand [the context of the news]."

- **Computers and Internet**

Access to computers, in both public and private settings, seems to be as prevalent as access to television, however the interviewees drew clear distinctions regarding their usage. Some refugees owned computers that they had purchased with their own money. These purchases were always made after living in Israel for several years. None of the recently arrived refugees had a computer, and they used Internet cafés instead. Some of the refugees used 3G mobile services to access the Internet on their laptops; others accessed Wi-Fi hot spots in public spaces, and some reported that they had cable modems and routers at home. A South Sudanese refugee said that before he obtained Wi-Fi connectivity in his apartment, "I go to the coffee shop, pretend I am drinking tea […] use my time there two -three hours, depending on whatever I want to do, and I go back home […] I was doing this every day after work." Another South Sudanese refugee was able to benefit from an outside Wi-Fi signal, probably picked up from a neighbor's network, for use in his apartment.

While computer access was available at some level or other to virtually all interviewees, the specific purposes served by the computer varied. Yahoo! Messenger emerged as the preferred application among those refugees who used computers to communicate with family members. However, while *communicating* over computers was the first use cited by interviewees across the board, many *information-seeking* functions were listed as well, and they were as diverse as the interviewed population. Such uses included searching for information about health issues; using translation services such as Google Translate; searching Google for information ranging from "if I want to find out the important things like what is the meaning of America, what is the background of Israel, of Africa" (South Sudanese refugee), to the status of refugees in different countries (Eritrean refugee); playing games such as Sudoku, Angry Birds, Farmville, listening to music or watching videos on YouTube.

Accessing news was also prevalent among those interviewees who had the capability to do so. News sources included local sites, such as the English-language newspaper websites www.haaretz.com and www.jpost.com, and non-Israeli sites, which varied, depending on the nationality of the interviewees. For example, a South Sudanese refugee said he read South Sudanese newspapers on the Internet.

Several interviewees distinguished themselves through the multifaceted, unique or sophisticated manner in which they put their Internet connection to use. One Sudanese refugee

seized the opportunity of his temporary stay in Israel and his Internet connection to the Internet to acquire an education. "The most important [thing] now is I always study online," he said. "I study English. I prepare myself to sit on the psychometric exam."[16] Another Sudanese refugee sought to express himself and help his fellow travelers through the Internet by creating a website that told his story. "I need money," he said, "but I also want people to know about my life."

- **Newspapers**

Newspapers were also used by some of the interviewees to gather information. Eritrean and Sudanese refugees mentioned reading and even purchasing *The Jerusalem Post* occasionally, "sometimes when they have important news," as one phrased it, or "when there is something important," as another said.

A most interesting development has been the newspapers that these recent newcomers to Israel have established for themselves. In 2011, a new publication began appearing in the streets of Tel Aviv, titled *The Refugee Voice.* Published in four languages – Hebrew, Arabic, Tigrinya and English – it was created by and for refugees residing in the city. The *Voice* was supported by Israeli NGOs and boasted an attractive website as well (www.therefugeevoice.com). One of the Eritrean founders of the *Voice* explained the logic behind the establishment of the paper as such: "In short, it is the voice of the voiceless people." His Eritrean colleague at the paper said that "we also wanted to make some, some understanding to the Israeli public, you know for example I met several people who they say don't really understand about who we are, what we are doing, you know? And then we started to tell our stories." They were not able to say, however, what impact their newspaper actually had. The newspaper has since folded and its website is no longer accessible.

In addition to the *Voice*, the Eritrean community regularly publishes two newspapers in Tigrinya. "You know there are so many skilled people … who have the experience of like editor, editing newspapers back home, and they started to print out newspapers because they know that you know people are living without any gaining of new language, you know they write good things," explained an Eritrean refugee. This may resemble what Kama (2008) has defined as "diasporic media". Kama (2008) demonstrated these unique media by analyzing newspapers published by and for the Israeli Philippine labor migrant community; however one can find few similarities between *The Refugee Voice* and the Tigrinya papers and the outlets that aimed at the different labor migrants audience. These newspapers serve as "re-socialization agents" (Kama, 2008: 225) as well as provide their consumers with "practical information and symbolic means in order to be able to adapt to the new environment" (Kama, 2008: 225). However, this calls for a further study that may compare between refugees' newspapers and other migrant communities, a task that is beyond the scope of this limited study.

4. Resolution

The sense of disconnectedness among the refugees emanates, as noted, from the government's policy of deliberately maintaining this population's temporary status. Nonetheless, refugees are building their own digital detours, just like any other disconnected community (Schejter & Tirosh 2012). Yet, their challenges may be greater considering the lack of state support. "We were being totally used [i.e. exploited], because we did not have information," said a South Sudanese refugee describing his journey to Israel through the African deserts. Aware of the connection between information and survival, most interviewees described their information needs in the same breath as they described the solutions for such needs. Still, some needs remained unresolved. The state itself, which reluctantly agreed to host the refugees, has provided virtually no information services to this guest population, although such services could have benefited them and even alleviate some of the costs to society incurred by their presence. Indeed, the refugees expressed anxiety about their constantly changing status as a result of shifting government policy.

The community setting is very much of the refugees' own making, and as such, provides the "resolution" for many of its members' own information needs. The members create their own community networks, launch newspapers both for themselves and for the purpose of communicating with Israeli society at large, own and operate the Internet cafés they use, save money to purchase their own ICTs, share ICTs with their fellow community members and so forth. Each technology accessed serves different needs.

The refugees said they had communication needs that have yet to be resolved. A Nigerian refugee noted that "at times we cannot rely on information of our people and at times some people they give misinformation … even our own people." The three Nigerian refugees interviewed concurred that the one source of information they could always rely on were the civil society organizations. An Eritrean refugee described being able to seek information online as his primary need, and said he found the Internet itself confusing. Difficulties in communicating with relatives abroad persisted, sometimes because these relatives had no access to communication systems. An illiterate refugee could not overcome his illiteracy in order to communicate over the Internet, though he could read numbers well enough to dial from a payphone using a calling card. A South Sudanese refugee concluded our interview by saying: "I don't feel I have all the information I need. If I all the time search what I like on the Internet it will be easy to understand [the world]."

Discussion and conclusion: Addressing the information needs of refugees

The interviews, site visits, and observations have unraveled the information needs as defined by the refugees. As the ultimate "others" in the Israeli society (Kritzman-Amir, 2009, 2015), their needs are as unique as their social position. Three types of unique information challenges and problems emerged: personal, institutional, and spatial. Indeed, the qualities of contemporary media

allowed the refugees to build digital detours to bypass the physical and virtual roadblocks created by the host society on their digital highways: They created unmediated social networks, in which those with access to media serve as "information leaders"; they established access institutions tailored to their specific needs; they learned to utilize media both local and international in both private and public settings; and they put contemporary media technologies to use. They learned that information was both a basis for survival and a resource for innovation, and they were made aware of what elements of information are still scarce in order to provide for a better quality of life.

Indeed, the conversation about the gap between those who have access to the information they need and those who do not – often referred to as "the digital divide" – has developed over the last decade from a focus on connectivity and access to information and communication technologies, to a conversation that encompasses the ability to use them and to the utility that usage provides (Wei et al., 2011). However, contemporary policy debates regarding digital exclusion do not take into account the development of new media technologies and their unique characteristics, nor the impact that these characteristics have on the information needs of the populace at large, and on the unique needs of distinct groups within it, in particular those weakened by social, cultural, political and economic marginalization.

In a previous work, we had identified four characteristics whose combination differentiates contemporary media from their predecessors in terms of the user's perspective: abundance (of content and channels), mobility, interactivity, and multimediality (Schejter & Tirosh, 2014, 2015). These are not technological characteristics per se; rather, they highlight aspects of what these media can provide to users, which their predecessors did not. Indeed, contemporary media changed what we define as "the sociability of media" – a combination of the quality of both the information that is being communicated, and the communication that is being mediated (Schejter & Tirosh, 2015). Thus, contemporary media can contribute to a more effective communication process and better access to information.

While the treatment of refugees in Israel can and has been critiqued on different levels, in particular with regard to the questionable adherence of the "solutions" proposed by the Israeli government to universal notions of human dignity, a major step in the improvement of their condition can be taken by addressing their information needs. This could also be the goal of non-governmental organizations whose expertise is refugee rights, and whose current focus it seems has been in the defensive role of holding back the government's oppressive policies. One theoretical foundation for providing such support can be based on the "capability approach" to social justice (Sen, 1989), which focuses on a person's actual capability to make use of the goods, services and opportunities available to them, rather than on the mere access to or ownership of such goods (Sen, 1980). A Senian approach would lead those concerned with the quality of refugee life to add

two components to their efforts – they should focus on educative initiatives that will help refugees utilize contemporary media, and they should add a participatory component to their efforts by enabling the refugee population to express its needs so that they can be addressed.

Refugees are constantly involved in the process of answering their own information needs; needs that are crucial for their survival and wellbeing. As we have seen from the efforts they have taken to build communication and information capabilities, addressing the information needs of the refugee community can indeed provide a true necessity of theirs and, perhaps, improve their quality of life. While studies about refugees and advocacy of refugees' rights are somewhat indifferent to the refugees' information needs, this study will hopefully open the door for further research and political activity that would address them.

Endnotes

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2. http://www.unhcr.org/53a155bc6.html; http://www.unhcr.org/558193896.html

3. See UNHCR's 2014 Global Trends Report, available at: http://unhcr.org/556725e69.html

4. See UNHCR's 2014 Global Trends Report, available at: http://unhcr.org/556725e69.html.

5. Source: http://www.piba.gov.il/PublicationAndTender/ForeignWorkersStat/Documents/july2015.pdf

6. Source: http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.html (accessed May 31. 2016)

7. Government Decision No. 3936 of December 11, 2011. Available at http://www.pmo.gov.il/PMO/Secretarial/Decisions/2011/12/des3936.htm (accessed on January 2012)

8. Source: http://edition.cnn.com/2015/09/10/europe/migrant-facebook-refugees/

9. Source: http://globalnews.ca/news/2219299/how-refugees-are-using-google-maps-social-media-to-help-cross-borders/

10. Source: http://qz.com/500062/the-most-crucial-item-that-migrants-and-refugees-carry-is-a-smartphone/

11. Source: http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/apps-refugee-crisis-coding/413377/

12. The majority of Ethiopian Jewish immigrants speak Amharic; a minority among them speak Tigrinya.

13. A refugee active in one of the refugee-assisting NGOs introduced us to the café owner. Attempts to set a time for conversation were gently deflected at first; however, he eventually agreed to talk. At the time of the meeting, his Internet connection went down and he needed to get help from the ISP. Since he does not speak any Hebrew and the operator at the ISP could not understand his English, I got on the phone with the service center and made an appointment for the service crew to come and fix the problem. The atmosphere changed immediately and he became fully cooperative.

14. In recent years the exchange rate has fluctuated between NIS 3.5–4 = US$1.

15. An American-evangelical TV channel based in Cyprus.

16. The Israeli university admission test.

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