



CLAIMING EXISTENCE THROUGH SMARTPHONES

Marie Figoureux

In July 2021, the Palestinian film “So they know we existed”¹ travelled the world, in opposition to the Palestinian people enclosed in an open air prison. The movie is composed of videos made by Palestinians during the 11-day war in Gaza in May 2021. This recent example adds to the continuous adhering to smartphones and social media, which is providing minoritized groups a new tool to claim their existence.

This use of smartphones and social media has also been apparent during the so-called refugee crisis of 2015. The migration movement was highly mediatized, not only by third party media, but for the first time this journey was documented by people on the move themselves². Through different applications, the world found itself at the front seat of these dangerous travels. Social media are actively used by migrants as channels of information to

¹ Palestinians film war in Gaza: “So They Know We Existed” – New York Times.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4P_L_088Diw

² d’Haenens, L., Joris, W., & Heinderyckx, F. (Eds.). (2019). *Images of Immigrants and Refugees*. Leuven University Press.



decide whether to migrate, and where to settle³. Not only before and during the journey do people who migrate rely on these informative sources. Once they settle in a new environment, social media are used among refugees to find accessible information, overcome social isolation and learn about responsibilities of citizenship in the new country⁴. Social integration in a virtual community can co-exist with offline integration⁵.

Not only has the technology of smartphones and the interconnection through social media been found to be an essential tool in navigating life decisions, it has provided a medium for minoritized groups to claim a voice and existence. In 2018, the book 'No friend but the mountains' by Behrouz Boochani was published⁶. The author, seeking asylum in Australia, has written the book entirely via WhatsApp. The autobiography tells the story of his journey to Christmas Island and his incarceration in the immigration detention center on the Australian island. The medium enabled him to share his story with the world, an otherwise impossible undertaking.

The sharing of stories on social media has already shown a massive strength, such as the continuing force of #metoo through which victims of sexual harassment and assault claim their narrative. Research has shown the online community to be a space of identity-making, for example for queer and disabled people⁷, seeking validation and becoming involved. However, the online

³ Dekker, R., Engbersen, G., Klaver, J., & Vonk, H. (2018). Smart Refugees: How Syrian Asylum Migrants Use Social Media Information in Migration Decision-Making. *Social Media + Society* *Society*, 4(1).

⁴ Imani Giglou, R., Buiter, A., Borowski, M., Joris, W., & D'Haenens, L. (2021). "Understanding the Role of Social Media on the Road to Social Inclusion: The Case of Syrian Refugees in Belgium." In P. Tsatsou (Ed.), *Kwetsbare mensen en digitale inclusie: theoretische en toegepaste perspectieven*. Foreseen in 2021.

⁵ Mittelstädt, A. & Odag, Ö. (2016). Social media use and social integration of ethnic minorities in Germany: A new interdisciplinary framework. *Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications*, 2(1), pp. 21-32.

⁶ BBC News
<https://web.archive.org/web/20190201004223/https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-47072023>

⁷ Miller, R. (2017). "My voice is definitely strongest in online communities": Students using social media for queer and disability identity-making. *Journal of College Student Development*, 58(4), pp. 509-525.



communities not only facilitate such claiming of voice and identity, but might trigger feelings of isolation and marginalization.

The relatively low barriers to partake on social media (weighed against the barriers to take voice in regular media or politics) creates opportunity to share stories and claim existence. People who were 'caged in silence'⁸ are making use of the medium to create their own narrative rather than have to endure a dominant perspective.

⁸ Dzoguji, C. (2019). The great thing about social media was how it gave a voice to voiceless people. *Nuha Foundation*.
https://nuhafoundation.org/home/blog/bloggingentries/2019/youth/the-great-thing-about-social-media-was-how-it-gave-a-voice-to-voiceless-people-jon-ronson-2/#.YP110_kzaUk