

How asylum seekers and refugees in the UK negotiate online privacy and visibility

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This paper concerns how refugees and asylum seekers in the UK and greater Europe share and do not share aspects of their selves and opinions online amid the possibility that they might – at some point – be forced to leave. Concerns around digital privacy are currently common in mass media and academic literature (e.g., Nissenbaum 2004, 2010 and 2011; Solove 2007; Ronson 2016). In these discussions, the concerns are often couched in terms of the European and American professional middle class. For example: what if off-colour Twitter jokes I told years ago re-surface, and I am fired from my job? Others relate to identity: in what ways can I be ‘out’ as gay online, if I am not ‘out’ with my conservative family? The general framework of these concerns is that in modern life, keeping some parts of our life separate from others helps us handle conflicting roles. The Internet – with its wide reach and the long trail of history it leaves – complicates this.

Refugees fleeing conflict and political hostility also have social fears, but with the added possibilities of mortal consequence. As, Emir, an Iranian refugee living in the UK, framed it to me:

‘It’s fear to be honest. It’s like you are frightened. You’re fleeing from something or somewhere. You’re trying not to be mentioned. So you don’t use social media. If you do, you use a crazy different name. You try to find another name, very different with what you are.’

For years, Emir had a Facebook account but did not show his face; his profile picture was railway video. An acquaintance of his was living in the UK. His wife returned to Iran, where she was – according to Emir – imprisoned for having ‘liked’ a politically-minded Facebook post. I have heard that his own decision to leave was in part spurred by once-active posters abruptly ceasing activity on an online message board for Iranian Christians.

In the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’ – as it was described in European media – an image was popularized of the tech-savvy refugee, using smartphones to navigate Europe while staying in touch with friends and family both back home and in a developing diaspora (Gillespie et al 2016). The flip-side to these possibilities are fear – what if hostile governments track my online activity, in Europe or back home? What if it gets myself or my family imprisoned? What if I was deported, and greeted by border agents with my Facebook profile – telling all about my travels, and my thoughts on my once and future tormentors?

The paper is drawn from 2017 and 2018 fieldwork with refugee-focused NGO’s in the Nottingham area, which gave me a condensed vision of the local ecosystem of support, as well as the day-in, day-out issues that asylum seekers encountered which I contextualized in online participant-observation and substantive interviews. The paper aims to describe, complicate and better qualify fears like these, and how asylum seekers and refugees negotiate their online social lives under a ‘primary identity’ amid these possibilities. I argue that despite fears that online posting may have potential mortal consequences, conservative social media habits are felt more immediately in terms of how they might impact social relations. In both physical and social threat, social media allows both a possibility to communicate and acts as an insulating geographic layer of protective mediation, which may increase as refugees settle into lives without immediate physical threat.

The impact of digital information, firstly, often is felt in the realm of possibility and ambiguity. In the UK, an important bit of context is that governmental and UK Border Association policy is often described variously in terms of ‘disbelief’, ‘denial’, and ‘ignorance’ (Robinson 1999, Jubany 2011, Griffiths 2012), referring to the various ways that the UK government relies on passive hostility. This manifests, for example, in long waits in asylum process. In the assessment of claims, as described in Jubany’s 2011 ethnographic account and more recent journalism (Lyons and Brewer 2018, Lyons 2018) assessors are taught to study the evidence presented in claims for ‘believability’. Claims are thus assessed according to various intuitions, prejudices and assumptions. Moreover, however, despite the increasing abundance of digital data, the UK Border Association does not seek out information that does not come to it. Assessors do not compare refugees’ claims to their Facebook profiles, but rather judge them against their own minds and information on countries and regions in often outdated databases. Producing credible information to submit is the applicant’s challenge, and ideal submissions are official documentation like passports and arrest warrants that may not exist. A result is that rather than ‘protecting’ information, applicants often find themselves in absurdist situations where they cannot credibly substantiate basic aspects of their lives – not only that hostile agents threatened them, but where they have lived most of their lives.

This ambiguity carries over even to violent regimes, whose demands on public speech and harsh reprisals often have an indirect relationship to ‘rooting out’ their enemies offline. Two Syrians I talked to who were familiar with the state security apparatus – one from a records office, one an activist who spent time in prison – painted a picture of the regime’s limited technical skills more than its omnipotence. In 2014, Lynch, Freelon and Aday had already called the Syrian conflict “the most socially mediated civil conflict in history” for the amount of content being put online by all sides. Later, the paper will return to how Syrians express their political views.

In general social life, however, many refugees’ online activity may be read as ‘conservative’. Miller et al (2016) described “public social media is conservative”, born out by the book’s co-author Elisabetta Costa’s work in Mardin, Southeast Turkey (2016, 2017). They mean that people in general often treat online venues with wide visibility, such as Facebook, as ‘public spaces’, and situate their behaviour there within offline norms. As broadly relevant to many refugees in Europe (and this paper’s ethnographic interlocutors from Iran and Syria), Costa situated this conservatism within the anthropology of the Middle East and Islamic societies that have emphasized the valuation of ‘honour’ for men and ‘public modesty’ for women (both heavily configured around propriety of following social and display norms in public). In her community, this in part contributed to individuals putting less information on Facebook while being highly active on messaging services like WhatsApp, which easily allows users to send discrete messages to individuals and small groups.

In my own framing, if Facebook is a venue whose flagship affordance is building a singular identity and using it to share links, photos and ideas with many people at once, many people simply don’t want that. I can count on one hand the number of posts many of my interlocutors made on their own walls within the previous year. They deliberately configure privacy settings to maintain individuated and small-group-based relationships. Yet there are ways to use Facebook beyond building up online profiles. In particular, my interlocutors valued social media for how it enabled them to seek news of home through a combination of friends multiple mainstream media channels (often aggregated through Facebook), and anonymous WhatsApp groups.

This is also to say that, inasmuch as privacy concerns are oriented preventing one’s social circle from ‘knowing’ things about oneself, knowledge does not equate to action, and there are many ways one can ‘know’ or ‘not know’ things. As per Taussig’s ‘public secret’ (1999), as it pertains to social relations (and notwithstanding other actors’ security breaches and data analytics). The ‘drama of

unveiling' that would result from forcing issues into the Facebook public sphere can, for many people, be largely avoided by not posting.

While some – like Emir – coached their relative lack of visibility online in terms of fear, for others, it was a sense of modesty or disinterest. Amad is far from disinterest. He is among the most active Syrian political posters I know on Facebook. He lives on a student visa in a country known for its political hostility to refugees. Despite this, he is in a relatively insulated position as the son of academics, in a family of a dozen who have all since left and live throughout Europe and America on various visa statuses. While he does not know what he will do when his visa runs out next year, he is in a relative position of safety.

Amad's friend list is private, but he told me he has 1,800. Some of my interlocutors emphasized that a public friend list can be dangerous – by letting anyone in on knows who, they can work out your politics by association. Yet for Amad it was less fear than modesty that drove his friend list private. He did not feel it was important to share that he knew this many people. It was only recently that he posted an image of him and his girlfriend of two years, who is from another European country. He frames this as more a reflection of her social media shyness than his. He recently posted about attacks by ISIS, and another story about Syrians who only recently heard that their relatives had died long ago. He described himself as a 'news source', striving to portray many sides of the conflict to friends and family of diverse backgrounds. His goal in posting is not necessarily to give 'his' view, but to report the violence that is happening. When Amad's uncle once confronted him online about a particular post that blamed an attack on the Asad government, Amad reminded himself that his uncle still lives in Syria – his uncle is under different pressures, he has a different perspective. In situations such as these, Amad maintained his relationships while also expressing his own overall frustration with the conflict for a broad audience.

This sense of 'striving for neutrality' in posting surfaced in other discussions. Most Syrians to whom I spoke did not overtly take a 'side' in our conversations, but emphasized the conflict's complexity their frustration with and ambivalence toward multiple violent actors. They found it easier to be against the factions than to support them, and felt sadness and grief at what was happening. However, they would also profess to know what others' political beliefs were, based off what was said and unsaid – especially in how individuals sharing mass media stories about particular attacks and deaths could be attributed to one side or another. They applied the term '*grey people*' to those who did not take sides overtly, even in this indirect manner. The term, for Amad, had connotations of a deference to the status quo, though for others neutrality meant public neutrality. Amara, a PhD student, identified as a 'grey person' and phrased her reasoning thusly: "I was one of them – not because I didn't pick a side, but because I didn't want to be on social media on anyone's side."

Amid this immediate social risk and potential future physical risk, social media offers both protection and pain in how it allows observation and expression. Emir described the mixture as rendering him an ineffectual "spirit".

"Sometimes I used the word that we are like people who passed away. If you believe in spirits, we are exactly the same. We cannot go back to that world. We might hear it, we cannot touch it, but we can see."

The insulation afforded by physical distance can be both physically protective and emotionally challenging, and again – despite his fears – his experience of online activity was characterized by both potential threat and apparent lack of consequence. When I spoke to him, Emir was in the process of negotiating his identity online toward a more focused, singular one, coinciding with rising professional success. As a mature student, he had recently completed a masters' degree in the arts.

His final project won an award. He was initially grateful that his university's online listings mis-identified the country he was from, though this visibility – and his increasing Facebook presence – presents further steps toward building ties between his offline life, his online one, and his Iran-based relationships. If he is to continue on this career path, he knows he will become more visible – and after years of living in the UK, in relative peace, he feels a sense of increasing security.

As asylum seekers and refugees continue life in Europe – amid various diverse, complex legal status – they continue to negotiate how they portray themselves online. The physical danger recedes in its immediacy, even with the possibility of eventual return. For the time being, life goes on amid the ambiguous impact of the information they share. The potential of online activity to impact ongoing social relationships remain – and as they stay in touch, refugees find it easier to avoid the social 'drama of unveiling' online as they seek information and express themselves, most directly, on the sadness of separation and conflict.

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