

Central American refugees: protected or put at risk by communication technologies?

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In a world that is more interconnected than ever, many refugees cannot obtain information or communicate when they most need to. Paradoxically, carrying a phone or connecting to the internet can put them at risk if they do not take security measures.

For refugees and other migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – the Northern Triangle of Central America¹ – communication is one of their greatest priorities during their route north. From interviews conducted in migrant shelters in Mexico in 2016, it was clear that many refugees prefer to invest a significant part of their scarce resources in maintaining contact with their families, friends or acquaintances who can assist them on their journey.²

Information is often prioritised even over food or shelter. Most of those whom we interviewed travelled with their own mobile phone or wanted to get one. They also increasingly use apps like Google Maps to source information about countries they are unfamiliar with, and they use social

networking sites, especially Facebook, and messaging services like WhatsApp when possible. They use Facebook primarily to communicate with relatives and other acquaintances who are in their countries of origin or in the United States (US), as well as to contact people whom they think will be able to help them evade roadblocks and who might be able to transfer money to them.

Only five interviewees claimed to have planned – before starting out – a communication strategy for their own protection. Most said they just planned to try to communicate when and where possible. For some who did dedicate time and effort to assess each context and coordinate with their families, it was vital that their relatives knew their exact location each day, so that

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they would be able to launch a more effective search for them in case of loss of contact.

According to those interviewed, their main information needs are: reliable data on areas of greatest insecurity (due to the presence of armed groups); the location of police checkpoints; the cost of bribes they might need to pay at each stage; the characteristics of each place or terrain that they will cross next; and the requirements, procedures and timescales of requesting refuge in Mexico.

Risky communication

Travelling through Mexico with a mobile phone can pose a threat in itself. Mexican criminal groups often kidnap refugees and other migrants who have relatives or connections in the US and force them to provide that person's contact details – who can then be contacted for ransom demands. The mere act of carrying a phone can attract the attention of criminals and lead them to believe that the migrant has relatives who might be susceptible to extortion. Undocumented migrants travelling through Mexico with a mobile phone also run the risk of being confused with a 'coyote' (people trafficker), whether they are intercepted by criminal groups or by Mexican immigration authorities. Criminals attacking a group of migrants will assume that the one who carries a phone is the one who is guiding them to the north. In that case, criminals may require that person to give them a 'fee' for allowing them to guide migrants through the territory controlled by the gangs. This has been the operating model of the Los Zetas drug cartel in recent years.

From the testimonies collected, it seems that borrowing a phone or giving it to another migrant to make a call or send a message can also cause problems. The risk of using the telephone of another migrant is that the number of the relative or other person called is recorded in the device and can be used for extortion purposes. Migrants can take the precaution of deleting the number they have called but do not always do so.

For many of those travelling through Mexico, digital communication is seen as



Mobile phones charging at a shelter for refugees and migrants.

safer than communication by telephone in this context of high insecurity because it does not require carrying a mobile phone or memorising phone numbers. However, some distrust of social networks such as Facebook is apparent; refugees fear that information on their whereabouts may appear on their profiles or in applications that are not completely secure.

Recommendations

Communication can bring enormous risks and yet those providing psychological care in shelters for migrants confirm that the ability to communicate with family members is extremely beneficial to refugees' emotional health, reducing their stress levels significantly.

According to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, providing access to information and technology should be of equal priority for humanitarian assistance as providing food, water and shelter. However, there is no coordinated national strategy in Mexico

to support migrants in this way; migrant shelters have limited resources – and each has its own communications policy, so that migrants cannot be sure what means of communication may be available in each place. Apart from a free call service offered by the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Mexican Red Cross to migrants in some shelters, there appear to be no initiatives by the Mexican authorities or by international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to address migrants' communication needs.

A number of recommendations emerge from our research findings. All actors working to protect refugees and other migrants in transit should prioritise their secure access to information and communication. It would also be advisable to set up a coordination framework between all actors working in the field and with others who could collaborate in certain projects as digital volunteers – that is, online activists organised into networks and located throughout the world who support humanitarian crisis response by collecting and managing data.

For their part, migrant shelters could offer migrants regular access to means of communication, while NGOs could provide workshops at the shelters to promote safe use of telephones and social

networking sites, and could also build websites providing practical and easily accessible information to those in transit.

The Mexican authorities, for their part, could promote humanitarian initiatives in the field of communication – such as providing free and secure telephone lines so that refugees and other migrants can talk to their families. They should also investigate telephone extortion and other similar crimes against refugees and other migrants and their families, and facilitate refugees' electronic access to the status of their asylum or humanitarian visa applications.

Finally, private companies could improve the telecommunication network in migrant transit zones and reduce the price of the phone cards used by refugees and migrants to call people in their home countries.

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1. Also now referred to as Northern Central America.
2. Fieldwork was carried out in September 2016 at migrant shelters La 72 (southern Mexico) and Belén Posada del Migrante (northern Mexico). The sample includes interviews with 40 refugees and other migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, aged between 14 and 53 years.