



# Getting to Europe the 'WhatsApp' way

The use of ICT in contemporary mixed migration flows to Europe

*This series produced by RMMS showcases key issues in mixed migration, highlights new research and discusses emerging trends.*

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**Abstract:** *The use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and social media became a key characteristic of mixed migration flows to Europe in 2015 and 2016. Both before but increasingly also during migration, migrants and refugees rely on their smartphones and social media such as Facebook, Twitter and applications such as WhatsApp, Skype, Viber and Google Maps, to get information on routes and intended countries of destination, to foster contact between smugglers and brokers or to reach out to others when in distress. Drawing on recent findings and reports, this paper proposes a typology of ways in which ICTs and social media are used by migrants and refugees before and especially during irregular migration.*

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## Introduction

The widespread use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and social media during irregular migration journeys is increasingly understood as a key means through which migrants and refugees make plans prior to departing and obtain information *en route*. It is already known that smartphones are vitally important for migrants and refugees during irregular migration. For example in early September 2015, the International Rescue Committee set out to assess how important mobile phones were to refugees and migrants coming from the Middle East, by checking what they took in their backpack on the journey to Europe. One object was in nearly every backpack: a smartphone.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, a Financial Times article concluded one donation to refugees camping at Budapest's Keleti railway station proved particularly popular: a solar-powered mobile phone charging unit. In addition, a recent International Organisation for Migration (IOM) survey of Iraqis in Europe found that 23% and 22% of people used social media and the internet respectively to plan their journeys.<sup>3</sup> There are gaps in the literature as to how ICTs and social media are employed by people for the purpose of and during irregular migration, which this paper sets out to address.<sup>4</sup>

Both before but increasingly also during migration, migrants and refugees rely on social media such as: Facebook, Twitter and applications such as WhatsApp, Skype, Viber and Google Maps, to find out about routes and border closures, avoid police or detection by border guards, find reliable smugglers and follow the news on government responses to the influx of refugees and migrants into Europe.<sup>5</sup> By sharing information on social media and using Google Maps to navigate, smartphones provide migrants and refugees with information on where to go next.<sup>6</sup> This paper focuses on the use of ICTs and social media in the migration trajectories of migrants and refugees heading for Europe, coming from the Middle East and from the Horn of Africa (particularly Somalia). While many studies have been conducted on the role of ICTs and social media after migration – related to migrant integration in host countries, to maintaining family relations, sustaining cultural identities and in supporting a family from abroad – the focus of this paper is on the use of social media before and especially during migration.<sup>7</sup> This paper proposes a typology of different ways in which ICTs are used by migrants and refugees before, and particularly during, irregular migration. Throughout the paper, examples and screenshots are presented of the actual use of social media by migrants and refugees. These examples are based on internet searches conducted on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in 2015 and 2016, using various expressions for irregular migration, such as 'Tahriib' in Somali.<sup>8</sup> These searches were conducted by Arabic and Somali speaking researchers.

### ICTs, social media and migration

In a globalised world, international migration is strongly influenced by new forms of information-sharing and the broad availability of ICTs.<sup>9</sup> This has been characterised by suggesting that new communication technologies are "making it normal for people to think beyond borders."<sup>10</sup> For migration researchers, the advancement of ICTs has even led to the development of phrases such as the "annihilation of space" and "death of distance" referring to how ICTs can bridge the distance between places of departure and intended destination(s).<sup>11</sup> Social media in particular fosters the exchange of dialogue, sharing of ideas and real-time information. As it is used here, social media is a broad term encompassing web logs (blogs), collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), content communities (e.g. YouTube), and even virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life) and virtual gaming worlds.<sup>12</sup> Social media platforms contain content generated by its users, and therefore refers to media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, which are also the main platforms cited in this paper. However, technologies that facilitate private communication such as Skype, WhatsApp and Viber are also often referred to social media, and in the context of the paper these applications are considered as social media.

<sup>2</sup> Handelsblatt, 2015. *Clinging to a Smartphone Lifeline*. Available at: <<https://global.handelsblatt.com/edition/271/ressort/politics/article/clinging-to-a-smartphone-lifeline>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

<sup>3</sup> IOM, 2016. *Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe*. Available at: <<http://iomiraq.net/reports/migration-flows-iraq-europe>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

<sup>4</sup> Financial Times, 2016. *Technology comes to the rescue in migrant crisis*. Available at: <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a731a50a-da29-11e5-a72f-1e7744c66818.html#ixzz41ks457ZX>> (last accessed: 27/05/16). See also: Aljazeera, 2015. *Isolated in Zaatari camp, Syrian refugees find ways to get online*. Available at: <<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/7/16/internet-access-zaatari-camp.html>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

<sup>5</sup> The Irish Times, 2015. *Mass migration guided by mobiles and social media*. Available at: <<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/mass-migration-guided-by-mobiles-and-social-media-1.2344662>> (last accessed: 27/05/16). See also: World Bank, 2016. *4 Smartphone tools Syrian refugees use to arrive in Europe safely*. Available at: <<http://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/4-smartphone-tools-Syrian-refugees-use-to-arrive-in-Europe-safely>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

<sup>6</sup> Handelsblatt, 2015. *Clinging to a Smartphone Lifeline*. Available at: <<https://global.handelsblatt.com/edition/271/ressort/politics/article/clinging-to-a-smartphone-lifeline>> (last accessed: 27/05/16). See also: Zijlstra and van Liempt, forthcoming. *Smart(phone) travelling: understanding the use and impact of mobile technology on irregular migration journeys*. *Journal of International Journal of Migration and Border Studies*.

<sup>7</sup> Charmarkeh, 2013. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*. *Social Media Usage, Tahriib (Migration), and Settlement among Somali Refugees in France*. Vol 29(1), 2013; Hamel, 2009. *Information and Communication Technologies and Migration*. UNDP Human Development Research Paper 2009/39.

<sup>8</sup> *Since conversations on WhatsApp, Skype and Viber are usually private, the internet search focused on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube*. In *Somali Tahriib literally means trafficking, but more specifically it is used to refer to a specific form of emigration involving mainly young Somali men (and to a lesser extent women) leaving for Europe via Ethiopia, Sudan and Libya and then across the Mediterranean sea*. For more see: Rift Valley Institute, 2016 (forthcoming). *Tahriib*. Rift Valley Institute, Nairobi Kenya. A similar word is also used in Arabic.

<sup>9</sup> IOM, 2015. *International migration, development and the information society*. Geneva: International Organization for Migration.

<sup>10</sup> Castles, 2007, cited in: Hamel, 2009. *Information and Communication Technologies and Migration*. UNDP Human Development Research Paper 2009/39.

<sup>11</sup> Cairncross, 1997 and Komito 2011, cited in: McGregor and Siegel, 2013. *Social Media and Migration Research*. UNU-MERIT Working Paper Series. #2013-068. Maastricht Graduate School of Governance (MGSoG).

<sup>12</sup> McGregor and Siegel, 2013. *Social Media and Migration Research*. UNU-MERIT Working Paper Series. #2013-068. Maastricht Graduate School of Governance (MGSoG).

Dekker and Engbersen (2012) argue that new communication channels opened by social media can transform migrant networks and thus facilitate migration through four key functions: (1) by strengthening strong ties with family and friends; (2) by creating weak ties to individuals that can assist in the process of migration (and integration); (3) by creating a network of latent ties; and (4) by creating a rich source of 'insider knowledge' on migration.<sup>13</sup>

Largely user driven, social media offers a place for potential, current and former migrants and refugees across many locations to develop networks and communicate on a range of topics. For instance, they can use ICTs to maintain ties and affinities with their countries of origin and communicate amongst personal networks.<sup>14</sup> Across countries of origin and destination, people have long shared stories about migration to either celebrate success or offer caution. Today social media offers a level of inter-connectedness that can also influence decisions about and during irregular migration.

While we argue that ICTs and social media are increasingly used in mixed migration flows, social media access across countries of origin, transit and destination is still uneven.<sup>15</sup> This is commonly referred to as the 'digital divide', the disparity that exists in access to ICTs between, for example, countries or regions, communities, ethnicities, gender, or age groups.<sup>16</sup> Some asylum seekers and refugees on the move may also be anxious to communicate with family members in their country of origin using ICTs due to concerns for their safety, as is the case in Eritrea for example where internet usage is strictly monitored.<sup>17</sup>

A recurring theme within the discourse on the European refugee and migrant 'crisis' of 2015, was the fact that, limitations aside, many refugees own smartphones, and use mobile applications to navigate their journeys. Potential migrants and refugees seek out virtual networks to gather information about suitable destinations and routes as well as integration in their intended destinations in addition to their friends and relatives in countries of origin, transit and destination. Brokers and smugglers are also providers of information both in person and online. Smuggling routes and procedures in intended destination countries change fast, as has been seen in Europe throughout 2015 with borders closing as people are on the move, and social media platforms have emerged as a means of communication to share information throughout networks about migration in real-time. Connecting potential migrants, migrants *en route*, and diaspora networks, mechanisms like Facebook, WhatsApp and Viber allow migrants and refugees to transmit information about the migration process. The uptake of social media can also be explained by the relatively young profile of irregular migrants, who in the case of Syrians and Iraqis are also largely middle class, and the growing influence of social media worldwide.<sup>18</sup>

As will be discussed next, social media platforms are used at different stages of migration and for different purposes such as acquiring passports and legal documents, information about best destinations, routes, information in transit, cost of migration routes, smuggler contacts and warnings about scams and/or fraudulent smugglers as well as closed routes. There is potential for social media sites to influence migrants and refugees in decision-making as it offers information, stories and images of the opportunities and risks in irregular migration. Overall Facebook acts as a 'gateway', introducing potential migrants to smugglers with further contact continuing through private social media platforms such as Whatsapp or Viber and sometimes phone calls.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Dekker and Engbersen, 2012. *How social media transform migrant networks and facilitate migration. Working Papers, Paper 64, November 2012. International Migration Institute / University of Oxford.*

<sup>14</sup> For more see Komito, 2011. *Social media and migration: Virtual community 2.0. Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 62.6

<sup>15</sup> Center for International Media Assistance, 2011. *Social Media in the Arab world: Leading up to the Uprisings of 2011.* Available at: <<http://www.databank.com.lb/docs/Social%20Media%20in%20the%20Arab%20World%20Leading%20up%20to%20the%20Uprisings%20of%202011.pdf>> (last accessed: 27/05/16). See also: Maitland, 2015. *ICTs and Refugees.* Available at: <<https://cmaitland.ist.psu.edu/icts-and-refugees/>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

<sup>16</sup> Guillén and Suárez, 2005, cited in Hamel, 2009. *Information and Communication Technologies and Migration. UNDP Human Development Research Paper 2009/39.*

<sup>17</sup> Opas and McMurray, 2015. *Under the Gaze of the State: ICT Use and State Surveillance of Eritrean Refugees in Italy. Refugee Survey Quarterly* 2015 34: 105-125.

<sup>18</sup> Pascucci, 2011. *Migration, Identity, and Social Mobility among Iraqis in Egypt. Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 28(1), pp.49-58. For data on the age/gender profile of migrants and refugees arriving into Europe see UNHCR, *Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response portal* <<http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

<sup>19</sup> Wired, 2016. *Refugees are more connected than ever. Rescuers must be too.* Available at: <[http://www.wired.com/2016/04/humanitarian-aid-startups/?mbid=social\\_fb](http://www.wired.com/2016/04/humanitarian-aid-startups/?mbid=social_fb)> (last accessed: 27/05/16). See also: BBC, 2015. *The Facebook smugglers selling the dream of Europe.* <<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-32707346>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

## 1.

## A typology of ICT use along mixed migration routes

Drawing on the data collected, this paper proposes a typology of ways in which ICTs and social media are used by migrants and refugees before and especially during irregular migration. What is set out here categorises the various modes of ICTs usage identified and is not considered exhaustive; serving instead as a basis for further elaboration and discussion.

### Updated information on migration routes

Principally, migrants and refugees on the move are using social media to collect up-to-date information on the best migration routes, imminent border closures, risks and weather conditions. In their research on migration trajectories in West Africa conducted in 2007, Schapendonk and Moppes confirmed the importance of communications in their interviews with migrants in Morocco, Spain and Senegal. Both irregular and regular migrants confirmed that they owned and regularly used mobile phones to remain connected with their friends and family abroad, both during the migration journey and once they reached their final destination. Many also used the internet as preparation for the journey and throughout its process.<sup>20</sup> Internet services were being used every step of the way: ICTs were used to find employment, transportation, and money transfer services. Schapendonk and Moppes concluded that migrants were, for example, less likely to be victims of theft since they no longer need to carry large sums of money with them to cover all expenses of their crossing suggesting a protective element of ICTs usage. They found that the availability of ICTs services reflected migrants' demands and facilitated the step-by-step migration process that characterises the journeys of most migrants.<sup>21</sup>

Schapendonk and van Moppes also pointed to the use of the global positioning system (GPS) in migration, referring to reports that Senegalese fishermen were using the technology to navigate the high seas between Senegal, Mauritania, and the Canary Islands, while smuggling irregular migrants into Spanish territory.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in 2015 and 2016, refugees and migrants were seen using Google Maps to find their way while crossing several countries on the so-called 'Balkan route' from Greece to North-Western Europe. Research on the Mexico-United States border also showed that youth migrating irregularly investigate routes online before their departure, while GPS helps them during transit. Recognizing the life-saving function of technology, programs are being developed in for example Mexico to create a "safe migration map" that provides crowd-sourced, near real-time information on which areas are experiencing high crime or other dangers so that migrants can migrate more safely.<sup>23</sup> Similarly the News that Moves website has a 'rumours' page providing information on subjects such as transportation to address misinformation being reported by migrants and refugees.<sup>24</sup>

In a recent report in the Irish Times, a volunteer working with migrants and refugees in Hungary was quoted saying: "They make contact and share information on Facebook and other social media. They know everything before they get here. From social media, they know where to connect to free Wi-Fi, where to sleep and eat, and change or receive money. They know better than the locals."<sup>25</sup> Increasingly, internet technologies and social media are being regarded as key survival tools for people on the road, providing access to recommended routes by fellow migrants, safety advice and GPS coordinates for family and friends, and smuggler boats.<sup>26</sup> The figure below exemplifies how Facebook is being used to warn people of, in this case, a closed border.

<sup>20</sup> Schapendonk and van Moppes, 2007. *Migration and Information. Images of Europe, migration encouraging factors and en route information sharing*. Radboud University Nijmegen.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Technology Salon, 2014. *Tech Salon Summary: Children, Youth, Migration and ICT*. Available at: <<http://technologysalon.org/tech-salon-summary-children-youth-migration-ict/>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

<sup>24</sup> News that Moves, 2016. *Rumours, Issue 18*. Available at: <<https://newsthatmoves.org/en/rumours/>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

<sup>25</sup> The Irish Times, 2015. *Mass migration guided by mobiles and social media*. Available at: <<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/mass-migration-guided-by-mobiles-and-social-media-1.2344662>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

<sup>26</sup> Political and Social Research Institute of Europe, 2015. *Social Media and Migration*. Available at: <<http://ps-europe.org/social-media-and-migration/>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).



Figure 1: Taken from a Facebook group called "Europe without Smugglers". A group member posted a warning to others about a closed route saying: "The army closed the way, no one can enter to it (the city). Yesterday they handed 100 migrants to the Greek police and detained them in the station until the morning and they deported them to Thessaloniki after they beat them. The police cars are patrolling the two bridges"

As the example of the 'Europe without Smugglers' Facebook page above shows, people now have access to information regarding their journey for which they had to solely rely on smugglers before. An article in the Financial Times noted that Syrians are increasingly hoping to avoid using smugglers once they reach Greece. From Greece onwards, they prefer to rely on the digital trail of news and GPS information created by friends and fellow refugees. As one person noted: "You have an entire network of people right in front of you. Smugglers on the land route are just an extra expense and often more risky than relying on fellow refugees."<sup>27</sup>

There are more social media groups specifically providing information on how to migrate to Europe without a smuggler. The figure below is taken from a Facebook group called "Asylum and Immigration without Smugglers" which has more than 15,000 members and helps migrants and refugees navigate their way through Europe individually or in groups, without the service of smugglers.<sup>28</sup>

Not all information is reliable though and there are rumours abound. One example that came to light recently were messages circulating on Facebook claiming Germany was sending boats to bring refugees from Turkey and Lebanon.<sup>29</sup>



Figure 2: The Facebook group depicted above, which advertises getting to France in three days for EUR 6,000, has 11,431 members and is intended for Arabic speakers. In one particular thread (not seen here), a member of the group is inquiring about forming a group, by posting: "I am in Turkey and would like to go to Germany or Sweden, any group leaving soon?" One person has commented with a reply: "My dad and brother are also travelling and we are in the process of forming a group, call me on this number: xxx".

27 The Financial Times, 2016. Technology comes to the rescue in migrant crisis. Available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a731a50a-da29-11e5-a72f-1e7744c66818.html#ixzz41ks457ZX> (last accessed: 27/05/16).  
 28 Political and Social Research Institute of Europe, 2015. Social Media and Migration. Available at: <http://ps-europe.org/social-media-and-migration/> (last accessed: 27/05/16).  
 29 The Financial Times, 2016. Technology comes to the rescue in migrant crisis. Available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a731a50a-da29-11e5-a72f-1e7744c66818.html#ixzz41ks457ZX> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

### Initiating contact with smugglers/brokers

Because of growing demand by migrants and refugees, especially after the Syrian war, smuggling has become a multi-million dollar industry. Europol estimates that in 2015 alone, criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling to and within the EU, had a turnover of between EUR 3-6 billion. According to Europol, this turnover is set to double or triple if the current scale of migration continues.<sup>30</sup> In such a big business sector, demand and supply not only meet in the offline world, but online as well. There are many different Facebook groups available that connect migrants and refugees to smugglers, with titles such as: "Smuggling Into the EU", "How to Emigrate to Europe", "Smuggling from Turkey to Europe", "Immigration and Travel to Europe", "Wishing to immigrate to Europe through Libya". Through all these pages, migrants and refugees can compare packages with different routes and destinations and compare prices.<sup>31</sup>

The Facebook group "Asylum and migration to pan-Europe" detailed below has 23,810 members. It includes testimony from someone who has successfully reached Sweden and after this comment, the smuggler, Waleed, has posted his number on Viber and WhatsApp for others who may want his services.



Figure 3: Here a Syrian refugee shared the details of his successful trip from Turkey to Sweden, via Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Italy. He explained: "I took a flight from Istanbul to Algeria for USD 400. For USD 600 I went from Algeria to Tunis, to the city Ben Gardane and paid USD 50 for food and drink. From Ben Gardane I crossed to Zuwara, Libya for USD 600 and from Libya to Italy for USD 1,200. I still had USD 1,200 so I exchanged them into Euros in Libya, where I was supported by a very good person, who took me to exchange them to EUR 1,300. When I arrived to Italy I paid EUR 40 to Rome [ ... ] then I took a ticket to Milan for EUR 45. I stayed in a hotel, I did not go to the Islamic complex because I did not want them to catch me again [as] there are a lot of Syrians so I paid EUR 50 in a hotel for 2 days. Then I paid EUR 400 from Milan to Sweden and now I still have EUR 300. It is the cost of my trip. The people I told you about, his name is ... and another one ... good luck for everyone"

It has been argued that the ease with which migrants and refugees are able to share information about migration has been crucial in making their journeys safer and reducing the ability of the smugglers to exploit them. As concluded in a Financial Times article, "Smuggling networks are helped by tech in that they can advertise and recruit migrants, but tech has also created safeguards around the illicit activity."<sup>32</sup> A 2015 article by Elini Diker for the Political and Social Research Institute of Europe, concluded that having information about smugglers and routes readily available on social media has both negative and positive consequences. On one hand, the ability to compare different sources of information and contact with other migrants and refugees ahead on the way to Europe, could increase the likelihood of taking a more secure route and making more meaningful choices. On the other hand, there is very little migrants and refugees can do to verify the trustworthiness of the smugglers on social media. Smugglers advertise their business on social media, often with a high-profile company attitude, downplaying any hint of risk. This may leave migrants and refugees vulnerable to manipulation.<sup>33</sup> Smuggling networks have taken full advantage of the demands for their services using social media to lure refugees, as if they are travel agencies.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Europol, 2016. Migrant smuggling in the EU. February 2016. European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC).

<sup>31</sup> Political and Social Research Institute of Europe, 2015. Social Media and Migration. Available at: <<http://ps-europe.org/social-media-and-migration/>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

<sup>32</sup> The Financial Times, 2016. Technology comes to the rescue in migrant crisis. Available at: <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a731a50a-da29-11e5-a72f-1e7744c66818.html#ixzz41ks457ZX>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

<sup>33</sup> Political and Social Research Institute of Europe, 2015. Social Media and Migration. Available at: <<http://ps-europe.org/social-media-and-migration/>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

<sup>34</sup> The Financial Times, 2016. Technology comes to the rescue in migrant crisis. Available at: <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a731a50a-da29-11e5-a72f-1e7744c66818.html#ixzz41ks457ZX>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

In a direct response to the EU-Turkey deal,<sup>35</sup> smugglers used social media to advertise boat journeys from Turkey directly to Italy, because the route to Greece was cut off. An advertisement on Facebook was offering passage on boats from Turkey to Italy for USD 4,000 saying, "the trip is on Saturday, from Mersin to Italy, on a merchant ship 110 metres (360 feet) long, equipped with food, water, life jackets and medicine". It soon disappeared again and Facebook started an investigation into its origins. Reacting to the advertisement, some refugees told the Guardian that the scheme could be a scam as scores of would-be migrants have been tricked in the past two years by people posing as organisers of similar trips.<sup>36</sup>

This example shows how smugglers use social media to quickly change their offers in response to policy measures and shifting routes. It also shows how, despite the fact that social media enable to share information about smugglers and thereby reduce their ability to exploit migrants and refugees, social media is still being used by smugglers to deceive. A timely reaction by the company to take down the page is one guarantee against false offers. Moreover, cooperation with platforms such as Facebook, might enable authorities to investigate the origins of smugglers and help in cracking down on smugglers and traffickers.

Social media platforms are also used by smugglers to offer specific services, such as fake passports and other identity documents. For example, the Arabic Facebook page called "Issuance and renewal of passports as well as driving licenses and education certificates" supports Syrians who are interested in obtaining these documents as detailed below:



Figure 4: One of the posts on the page was published by the administrator saying: "We provide 2, 4 or 6 years Syrian passport renewal at a price of USD 300; payment is in Turkey and after delivery. We also provide services for expatriates outside of Turkey with the same price in addition to shipping cost. We also provide college degrees, secondary degrees and junior high certificate. For contacts and inquiries xxx on Viber and WhatsApp". One commentator (comment not seen in the figure) posed the question: "How much does it cost for a new passport?", to which the publisher replied: "USD 1,800 if you have the military service ID, otherwise it's more".

In September 2015, the Telegraph reported on the use of Facebook by smugglers to sell fake Syrian identity documents to people from North Africa and other countries in the Middle East, pretending to be Syrian refugees to get asylum in Europe. An undercover Telegraph reporter posing as an Egyptian called a number left on an Arabic language Facebook site and spoke to a smuggler who offered to arrange fake Syrian documents for GBP 1,000. In response, Syrians, who are angry that people from other countries are taking advantage of their plight to get into Europe, also took to social media to express their anger. The Arabic language version of Twitter has an "expose fake Syrians" hashtag, which was at the time of this incident one of the most popular trending topics in Syria.<sup>37</sup>

35 The 'EU-Turkey deal' refers to an agreement between the EU and Turkey initiated in 2015 and further refined in 2016 whereby Turkey agreed to accept the rapid return of all migrants not in need of international protection crossing from Turkey into Greece and to take back all irregular migrants intercepted in Turkish waters in return for 3 billion euros for projects, visa liberalisation for Turkish nationals and re-energised EU accession talks. Additionally for every Syrian being returned to Turkey from Greek islands, another Syrian will be resettled from Turkey to the EU and Turkey will take measures to prevent new sea or land routes opening from Turkey to the EU. For more see: <<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18-eu-turkey-statement/>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

36 Thomson Reuters Foundation, 2016. Facebook investigates smugglers' advert of boat trips to Italy. Available at: <<https://www.rt.com/news/338087-migrant-smugglers-italy-facebook/>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

37 The Telegraph, 2015. People smugglers using Facebook to sell fake Syrian passports to economic migrants. Available at: <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11880979/People-smugglers-using-Facebook-to-sell-fake-Syrian-passports-to-economic-migrants.html>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

### Data on intended country of destination

Social media and ICTs have longed been used by people sharing stories about migration generally, including integration, and to maintain cultural ties through socio-cultural networks. For irregular migrants who may be interested in information about services or conditions in a specific location, social media is being used as a platform to learn more about countries of destination. An example is the Arabic Facebook group called "Information for asylum in the Netherlands and Sweden (learn more)" with 7,010 group members, as illustrated in the screen shot below.



Figure 5: In one of the posts, a member of the group asks: "Hello. Which country among Sweden, Netherlands and Germany do you recommend? I am married and with no kids. Thanks". He received one comment saying: "All of them are good but work is better in Germany, family reunification is faster in the Netherlands and future is brighter in Sweden, you choose".

Further comments on this page included the reply that: "In Sweden, future is brighter, there is no forced return, citizenship is almost guaranteed and its one of the important citizenships in the world but family reunification takes more than 6 months. All in all residency and family reunification takes 18 months". Another comment said: "each country has its pros and cons. In Sweden, you receive permanent residence but the residence and family reunification takes 18 month plus the climate in Sweden is very cold. Germany, residence is only for three years. Residence and family reunification takes a little longer but there are enough job opportunities especially for singles. The Netherlands, residency is for 5 years, good weather but work is little and family reunification takes time. If you're in a hurry the family reunification is faster in The Netherlands and future very good in Sweden. You choose".

### Safety and rescue en route

The ways in which people use social media to share information on, for example, changing routes was noted earlier. Another associated feature of social media as a safety net has been to call for rescue during migration, including in real-time, share weather reports and information on sea conditions. More than 58,000 people follow the Facebook page of Lukman Derky, a Syrian in France, who shared information on boats that have gone missing while crossing the Mediterranean Sea. This includes the last known GPS coordinates of the vessels, as well as readings for people in need on dry land, along with a request for the nearest follower to come to their aid.<sup>38</sup> When Hungary closed off its borders for Syrian refugees transiting through Europe in late 2015, forcing them to transit through Croatia and Serbia, an application was developed with a map showing the location of known land mines in these two countries, showing how ICTs can contribute to safety during migration.<sup>39</sup> An article by Babani, described a refugee whose wife fell ill at the Macedonian border and how he was only able to tell the border police that she needed urgent and very specialist attention thanks to a translation app on his phone. Another refugee told journalists, that if he had not had a mobile phone he would not have been able to call the coastguards to inform them that their boat was capsizing. He said 50 lives were saved as a result of that call.<sup>40</sup>

38 The Financial Times, 2016. Technology comes to the rescue in migrant crisis. Available at: <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a731a50a-da29-11e5-a72f-1e7744c66818.html#ixzz41ks457ZX>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).  
 39 NPR, 2015. A Harrowing Journey Into Europe, Aided By Apps And Internet Access. Available at: <<http://www.npr.org/2015/09/19/442754735/a-harrowing-journey-into-europe-aided-by-apps-and-internet-access>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).  
 40 Babani, 2016. Phones – crucial to survival for refugees on the perilous route to Europe. Available at: <<https://theconversation.com/phones-crucial-to-survival-for-refugees-on-the-perilous-route-to-europe-59428>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

Twitter has been used to call for help as well, as noted below; a Twitter subscriber who received a phone call from someone on a boat with a broken engine on the Mediterranean, used Twitter to get the number of the Italian coastguard, tweeting: "250 Eritreans women and children majority their ship is in distress in Mediterranean. Please help, they asking for help! Motor stop working". This was re-tweeted with GPS coordinates in order to get the attention of rescuers as the figure below shows.



Figure 6: Calling for help in real-time on Twitter

In July 2014, the Nairobi-based NGO Awareness Against Human Trafficking (HAART), received a Facebook message from a young Kenyan woman working as a domestic worker in Libya requesting assistance in evacuating a fellow Kenyan also working as a domestic worker, who was allegedly being mistreated by her employer. Because violence and insecurity in Libya caused the Kenyan embassy in Tripoli to close in July 2014, this Kenyan labour migrant needed to find alternative ways to leave the country. It quickly became apparent through the ensuing communication that this was not an isolated case, but there were in fact 31 Kenyan women stuck in Libya unable to return home. HAART worked with the Kenyan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to assist the women to return home. Most of them eventually escaped the homes that they were working when they received a WhatsApp message that there was a possibility that they could return to Kenya. This case highlighted the role that social media can play in providing safety to migrants. HAART became aware of the situation through Facebook and was able to communicate with the Kenyan women in Libya through WhatsApp, because the women had formed groups to discuss the issues that they were going through in Libya and how to get out.<sup>41</sup>

Highlighting how migrants and refugees themselves take to social media to warn about the risks of irregular migration, a Sudanese YouTube channel called "Refugees Al saloum" warns viewers about smuggling to Libya and a particular smuggler. The screenshot below is from a video that includes testimony from three men who were recruited by smugglers in Omdurman, Sudan, specifically from a market known as 'Souk Libya', only to have their money and passports stolen from them.



Figure 7: Screenshot from YouTube Channel Refugees Al saloum

41 RMMS, 2015. Social media & rescuing trafficked migrants - a case study. Available: [http://www.regionalmms.org/indexf9f7.html?id=44&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=319&cHash=a34b2adf53b814e1fabacdec7fdc562](http://www.regionalmms.org/indexf9f7.html?id=44&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=319&cHash=a34b2adf53b814e1fabacdec7fdc562).

Finally, the Somali Youth Anti Tahriib Organization, uses Facebook to warn Somalis about the dangers or irregular migration to Europe as detailed in the figure below.



Figure 8: Somali Youth Anti Tahriib organization Facebook group. Translation reads: Hey! Wake up, listen and see what those who went for Tahriib are going through and they lastly end up dying in the sea or cells for hunger. Our sisters are exploited and abused. You are the leaders of tomorrow which the country needs. Let's stop Tahriib.

### A platform for migrant and refugee voices

The previous sections focused on how ICTs and social media are being used during migration. It could be argued that ICTs and social media also drive migration. The success stories of those who made it to Europe spread instantaneously on social media and might influence those deciding to migrate.<sup>42</sup> Pictures shared on Facebook or through WhatsApp and Viber showcasing the lives of those who have 'made it' first reassure family members that their loved ones are safe and well but may also create further aspirations to migrate among those who are left behind.<sup>43</sup> Some migrants and refugees attest to staging photos to show their new life in Europe by posing alongside nice cars or touristic sites when the realities of their lives are quite different.<sup>44</sup> ICTs supplement the traditional channels of information such as word of mouth, locally advertised work opportunities and the shared experiences of family and friends who have themselves migrated. These images – which may include stereotypes or posed images of prosperity, comfort, wealth and opportunity – can have tremendous impacts on the final decision to migrate and the destination chosen especially amongst those for whom migration is already an option.<sup>45</sup>

Research on *Tahriib* from Somaliland and Puntland by the Rift Valley Institute, identified social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp as mechanisms to facilitate peer pressure.<sup>46</sup> The widespread availability of broadband internet in households, university campuses and the countless number of internet cafes around major towns means that virtual communication, for those that can pay, is relatively accessible across the Somali regions. The widespread use of smartphones means that young people are continuously connected with their peers outside the country. The authors noted that exchanges on social media sites constantly expose young Somalis who are still in the country to the lives of those who have left. Even though they seem to know these images are often not the reality of life in Europe, they nonetheless provide powerful incentives for young people to leave. In one example, a respondent told the researchers how his friend started to post pictures of himself in Europe standing in front of tall buildings, green grass and flowers; "He always posts pictures on Facebook and says to me why are you still in the dust land?"<sup>47</sup> Data from the RMMS 4mi project shows that 9% of over 1,300 migrants and refugees from Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea and Djibouti indicated that social media led them to believe that there would be better opportunities in their intended destination country, although friends and family (26%) are still a more important source of information (although they could still use social media to communicate with friends and family).<sup>48</sup> Migrants and refugees from Ethiopia and Somalia (12% and 9%) respectively, seem to rely more on social media than migrants and refugees from Eritrea (5%).

<sup>42</sup> Political and Social Research Institute of Europe, 2015. *Social Media and Migration*. Available at: <<http://ps-europe.org/social-media-and-migration/>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

<sup>43</sup> The World Bank, 2016. *4 smartphone tools Syrian refugees use to arrive in Europe safely*. Available at: <<http://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/4-smartphone-tools-syrian-refugees-use-to-arrive-in-europe-safely>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

<sup>44</sup> Personal communication with researcher. See also: Aljazeera, 2016. *Facebook sells paradise on earth to young Somalis*. Available at: <<http://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/africa/2015/04/facebook-sells-paradise-earth-young-somalis-150430134414207.html>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

<sup>45</sup> Schapendonk and van Moppes, 2007. *Migration and Information. Images of Europe, migration encouraging factors and en route information sharing*. Radboud University Nijmegen; Hamel, Y., 2009. *Information and Communication Technologies and Migration*. UNDP Human Development Research Paper 2009/39.

<sup>46</sup> Rift Valley Institute, 2016 (forthcoming). *Tahriib*. Rift Valley Institute, Nairobi Kenya.

<sup>47</sup> Rift Valley Institute, 2016 (forthcoming). *Tahriib*. Rift Valley Institute, Nairobi Kenya.

<sup>48</sup> The RMMS 4mi project (mixed migration monitoring mechanism initiative) is an innovative, low-cost approach to collect and analyse data on mixed migration flows, initially out of the Horn of Africa. Through a network of 30 locally-recruited monitors in strategic migration hubs in Northern, Eastern, and Southern Africa the 4mi project tracks Eritrean, Ethiopian, Djiboutian and Somali people on the move. <http://4mi.regionalmms.org>

The discussion on the Facebook page below shows the conflicting attitudes towards migration amongst Somalis:



Figure 9: One comment reads: "It's right immigration is good and there is prosperity in Europe" to which the next comment replies "immigration is a wrong idea because to me it's even hard to reach Europe and you will have to go through unbearable situations". The next comment reads: "To me I will urge people to migrate and it's a big lie if one said it's hard to come to Europe". "Hey guys hurry up before the European borders are closed". The final comment is "We are coming if all goes well. There is no life/work in the country (Somalia)".

Tributes are also posted to people who have died attempting to cross. In the *Back Way Road* Facebook group, for example, one member recently posted a picture of a Gambian young man who died trying to cross to Italy as a memorial.

Research on Iraqi refugees in Jordan demonstrates how social media can motivate but also agitate people without meaningful prospects of durable solutions in countries of first asylum. It found that they actively follow a wide variety of transnational news-channels reporting on the 'European refugee crisis', whilst double-checking on social media what is 'true'. Clips of friends who arrive on the shores of Greece are widely shared on Facebook. Among some it creates a determination to leave Jordan before they run out of money to travel illegally. Those who do not have the financial means or ability to leave express concerns of what the illegal travel of other refugees will mean in their case: why are people who go illegally 'rewarded' with leave to remain in Europe, while those who follow the 'legal' rules are being forgotten about. Pictures of people drowning in the Mediterranean Sea are also widely shared on Facebook, to emphasize the desperation of those who make the journey and as a plea for legal routes out of Jordan.

## 2.

### Responding to the growing influence of social media

As this paper has illustrated, ICTs and social media have transformed the way irregular migration is being planned, undertaken and quite literally, being navigated. From providing information on routes, to fostering contact between smugglers and brokers (as well as in some cases making smugglers irrelevant by allowing migrants and refugees to self-organise) and offering details on intended countries of destination. It is also a platform for sharing knowledge about risks and dangers including scams, alerting a wider audience to boat sinkings in real-time and for the unfiltered voices of migrants and refugees, who are very often at the periphery of debates and discussions about irregular migration. Therefore ICTs and social media are essential tools for any potential migrant or refugee that has led to the smartphone becoming a key item to have *en route*. Stakeholders working with migrants and refugees are also taking note of this growing phenomenon.

Governments have largely taken a deterrent-based approach to irregular migration and their approaches to ICTs and social media are no different. For example, the Government of Finland has launched a Facebook campaign called 'Don't Come' focusing on youth in Turkey and Iraq and the British immigration department has been hacking into phones and computers since 2013 to investigate immigration offences.<sup>49</sup> In a May 2016 article, Babani argued that, despite being a fundamental necessity, mobile phones can also be a threat. The digital traces they leave behind make refugees vulnerable to surveillance by the people or governments they are trying to escape, who now use sophisticated tools for tracking the movement of groups using GPS apps. Governments can also monitor their social media interactions and networks. According to this article, smartphone use by refugees illustrates "the twin dynamics of digital empowerment and surveillance in particularly extreme ways".<sup>50</sup> For this reason, WhatsApp, is one of the most popular apps, since it is encrypted and messages cannot be monitored. Early in 2016, EU states in partnership with Frontex, the EU external border agency, asked technology companies to pitch ways to track and control people trying to reach the continent before they get here. Proposals discussed included a smartcard ID system for those who reached Europe, to control access to food and accommodation and to have refugees to download tracking apps on their smartphones by offering helpful information about sea crossings and conditions in different EU countries. Refugee support groups and privacy organisations, however, questioned suggestions that IT companies could persuade people to put tracking apps on their phones in exchange for information about weather and the safety of different routes and noted that refugees and migrants would be unlikely to embrace an app that would make it easier for European governments to follow and intercept them.<sup>51</sup>

While Facebook itself is cracking down on pages advertising smugglers, the European Union is also discussing ways to involve Interpol to take a more active role in removing online content posted by smugglers.<sup>52</sup> Such efforts could have been inspired by the Australian government, which in 2000 developed a short film entitled "*It's not worth the risk*", showing poisonous snakes, sharks and crocodiles alongside boats that had run aground.<sup>53</sup> Then in 2014 Australia's Border Protection Department launched a "*No Way, you will not make Australia home*" YouTube channel, and designed a digital graphic novel targeting Afghan asylum seekers showing the situation people face in offshore detention centres.<sup>54</sup> There is little data about the impact of such information campaigns, including those on social media, although what is known is that they are often based on an inadequate understanding of how information is sourced by migrants and refugees.<sup>55</sup> Groups working closely with migrants and refugees are well placed to look into potential information campaigns that might be effectively used by people considering or undertaking irregular migration.

The "*Mapping Refugee Media Journeys*" project, by the Open University and France Medias Monde, is trying to get a better grasp of how social media both empower and endanger refugees – making them vulnerable to surveillance. The project, running from 2016 to 2018, will document the media and informational resources that refugees use from the point of departure, during their journeys across different borders and states, and upon arrival (if they reach their desired destination). By identifying the news and information resources used by refugees, and where they experience gaps or misinformation, the researchers intend to make recommendations to European Commission, to European

49 Sputnik News, 2016. "Don't Come": Finland Launches Facebook Campaign to Grapple With Migration. Available at: <<http://sputniknews.com/europe/20151024/1029043098/finland-campaign-facebook-migrants.html>> (last accessed: 27/05/16). See also: The Independent, 2016. British immigration officials hacked into refugee phones and computers. Available at: <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/british-immigration-officials-hacked-into-refugee-phones-and-computers-a6977311.html>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

50 The Conversation, 2016. Phones – crucial to survival for refugees on the perilous route to Europe. Available at: <<https://theconversation.com/phones-crucial-to-survival-for-refugees-on-the-perilous-route-to-europe-59428>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

51 The Guardian, 2016. EU asks tech firms to pitch refugee-tracking systems. Available at: <[http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/18/eu-asks-tech-firms-to-pitch-refugee-tracking-systems?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/18/eu-asks-tech-firms-to-pitch-refugee-tracking-systems?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other)> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

52 Politico, 2015. The Facebook front in the migration crisis. Available at: <<http://www.politico.eu/article/the-facebook-front-in-the-migration-crisis/>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

53 The Telegraph, 2000. Australia uses its wildlife to scare away refugees. Available at: <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/australiaandthepacific/australia/1343756/Australia-uses-its-wildlife-to-scare-away-refugees.html>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

54 The Guardian, 2014. Australian government targets asylum seekers with graphic campaign. Available at: <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/11/government-launches-new-graphic-campaign-to-deter-asylum-seekers>> (last accessed: 27/05/16). The campaign itself can be viewed here: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rT12WH4a92w>>.

55 McAuliffe and Marie, 2013. Seeking the views of irregular migrants: Decision making, drivers and migration journeys. Irregular Migration Research Program Occasional Paper Series. See also: Fleay, Cokley, Dodd, Briskman, and Schwartz, 2016. Missing the Boat: Australia and Asylum Seeker Deterrence Messaging. International Migration

Member states and their state funded international news organisations about what resources they might provide to help refugees make better-informed decisions.

An interim report of the project published in 2016, found that while there is an abundance of reporting about refugees, there is an inadequate provision of reliable news and information, which forces them to rely of alternative and often unverified sources of information, putting them at risk. The report expresses concern that the information deficit is in breach of the 1951 Refugee Convention and encourages the European Commission to support Member States to fulfil their obligations to provide vital and timely information to refugees.<sup>56</sup>

As has been described earlier, other groups are also pioneering ways to provide real time information and maps for migrants, share 'rumours' that can be addressed or provide alternative viewpoints including about irregular migration – in short harnessing the conversational aspects of ICTs and social media.<sup>57</sup> Currently smartphone apps such as "*Refugee Aid*" can be used by trusted organisations to provide information to people in need and others are in the pipeline according to a recent Financial Times article including services to update people on changing prices *en route* to avoid being over-charged.<sup>58</sup> Google has also launched an information portal called "*Refugee Info*" with information on the European side that could be extended to other locations.<sup>59</sup> With mobile technology being used to better understand migration, harnessing the available technology offers more possibilities to address the challenges faced by irregular migration.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>56</sup> The Open University and France Médias Monde, 2016. *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys: Smartphone and Social Media Networks*. Available at: <<http://www.open.ac.uk/research/main/sites/www.open.ac.uk.research.main/files/files/ecms/web-content/Mapping-Refugee-Media-Journeys-16-May-final-V1.pdf>> (last accessed: 20/06/16).

<sup>57</sup> See for example: <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W\\_UGPw6ZdKE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_UGPw6ZdKE)> and <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VkBeT-rIDm4>>.

<sup>58</sup> The Huffington Post, 2016. *The App That's Building Trust and Bringing Aid to Refugees*. Available at: <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/melissa-jun-rowley/the-app-thats-building-tr\\_b\\_9218220.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/melissa-jun-rowley/the-app-thats-building-tr_b_9218220.html)> (last accessed: 27/05/16). See also: The Financial Times, 2016. *Technology comes to the rescue in migrant crisis*. Available at: <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a731a50a-da29-11e5-a72f-1e7744c66818.html#ixzz41ks457ZX>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

<sup>59</sup> Al Jazeera, 2015. *Google launches Crisis Info Hub to help refugees*. Available at: <<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/10/google-crisis-info-hub-refugees-151024061606185.html>> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

<sup>60</sup> For more on this point see: Twigt, 2016. *Iraqi refugee households in Jordan: the active search for solutions*. *Forced Migration Review* (51). Available at: <http://www.fmreview.org/destination-europe/twigt.html#sthash.jbMfweJo.dpuf> (last accessed: 27/05/16).

## Conclusion

This paper described several ways in which ICTs and social media are currently being used by migrants and refugees on the move. Clearly, the role of ICTs and social media depends on whose perspective is being considered – individual migrants and refugees, governments or humanitarian organisations. In some ways, ICTs and social media could be regarded as having a positive influence from the perspective of migrants and refugees, for example where it allows them to share relevant and up to date information on routes, to be less dependent on smugglers or where it has been used to save their lives. However the flip side is that smugglers may use social media to lure them into false deals or that it creates unrealistic expectations, spreading rumours about destination countries encouraging more people to embark on dangerous journeys. Governments could use social media – and are increasingly doing so – to reach out to (potential) migrants and refugees with awareness raising campaigns or campaigns to discourage irregular migration or could even use it to track migration flows. Increased surveillance in order to stem migration flows can put an individual's privacy at risk although the evidence suggests that so far social media is being used by migrants and refugees to adjust their routes in response to border closures. Humanitarian organizations are using ICTs and social media to assist migrants and refugees, for example by providing real-time information on dangers, such as weather conditions, to allow them to directly contact them in case of emergencies, and to provide them with information on where to seek assistance en route. Finally, ICTs and social media offer a window to better understand migration flows as they occur, to better inform policy making and programming on the ground. Since the start of the European 'migration crisis' there has been a greater awareness about the use of ICTs and social media, which has become one of the major characteristics of migration flows in 2015 and 2016. In illustrating the inter-related nature of mixed migration and ICTs and social media, this paper should therefore be regarded as a basis for further elaboration and discussion on the use of ICTs and social media by migrants and refugees in mixed migration flows.

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# RMMS Briefing Paper 2: Getting to Europe the 'WhatsApp' way



**The Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS):** Formed in 2011 and based in Nairobi, the overall objective of the RMMS is to support agencies, institutions and fora in the Horn of Africa and Yemen sub-region to improve the management of protection and assistance to people in mixed migration flows in the Horn of Africa and across the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea in Yemen. The Steering Committee members for the RMMS include UNHCR, IOM, Danish Refugee Council (DRC), INTERSOS, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, IGAD and the European Union. The RMMS is a regional hub aiming to provide information and data management; analysis and research; support and coordination; and support to policy development and dialogue. It acts as an independent agency, hosted by the DRC, to stimulate forward thinking and policy development in relation to mixed migration. Its overarching focus and emphasis is on human rights, protection and assistance.

See our websites [www.regionalmms.org](http://www.regionalmms.org) and <http://4mi.regionalmms.org> or follow RMMS on Twitter @Mixed\_Migration

