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MADISON CHAPMAN

Madison is a graduate student of international affairs at The Fletcher School.

Under the Supervision of KIM WILSON, Sr. Lecturer, The Fletcher School

Kim Wilson is a Sr. Lecturer and Sr. Fellow at the Fletcher School, Tufts University. She is the lead author for a series of studies on the financial journey of refugees and migrants.

“There’s (Not) an App for That”: Taking a Hard Look at the “App-ification” of Migration and the “Need” for New Technologies

Practitioners, advocates and writers often underscore the link between migration and technology. This connection, they claim, promotes “access to information, finance... [and] social networks” that enhances “autonomy and self-reliance”.^{1, 2} Some migrants have developed applications to support integration in what some call the “app-ification of migration” or “Migrant Tech.”³ Yet it has been humanitarian and development agencies that have helmed the push for Migrant Tech. These entities have embraced technology to innovate solutions for specific problems encountered in migration from developing custom apps to using mobile money for cash aid.⁴

Academics have also entered the debate on Migrant Tech. Recent contributions include insights into migrant technology research,⁵ the negative repercussions of poor-quality information, and “digital litter.”⁶

Also stepping into the “technology gap”—perceived or real—are developers, who create applications for every possible use: integration, migrant health, mobile

- 1 Jonathan Kent (2019). “The Role of Technology in Addressing the Global Migration Crisis,” The Centre for International Governance Innovation.
- 2 Ivy Kaplan (2018). “How Smartphones and Social Media Have Revolutionized Refugee Migration,” UNHCR.
- 3 Marie McAuliffe (2018). “The link between migration and technology is not what you think,” World Economic Forum.
- 4 Gabrielle Smith et al. (2011). “New Technologies in Cash Transfer Programming and Humanitarian Assistance,” The Cash Learning Partnership, Concern Worldwide, Oxford Policy Management, PRIAD.
- 5 Simon Collin (2015). “Migrants’ Use of Technologies: An Overview of Research Objects in the Field,” *Journal of Technologies and Human Usability* 10(3-4): 15-29.
- 6 Meghan Benton (2019). “Digital Litter: The Downside of Using Technology to Help Refugees,” Migration Policy Institute.

“game-ified” bilingual education, and gender-based violence prevention.^{7 8 9} The International Organization for Migration (IOM) recently entered the fray with its MigApp, which provides information, a money transfer service, translation, and communication platforms (MigApp). Governments and organizations like the OECD have been quick to laud such interventions as an effort to make humanitarian aid “future ready”.¹⁰

Few doubt that technology, especially through mobile phones, plays a key role in migrant and refugee lives. Yet our research with Indian, Venezuelan, Lebanese, and Dominican migrants in Quito, Ecuador suggests that in spite of efforts to “app-ify” migrant integration, the most useful digital tools for migrants are not “Migrant Tech” at all. Instead, migrants take off-the-shelf applications (those not designed specifically for migrant life) and fit them to their needs. WhatsApp, for example, serves as a job board, a social media platform, a humanitarian referral network, a payment platform, a remittances tool, and a way to stay connected to family left behind. Migrants in Quito transfer word-of-mouth transactions to WhatsApp which has become the “central switchboard” for migrant life.

In short, WhatsApp extends already existing social networks and amplifies migrant relationships.

The “New-Old” Social Network: Maintaining Bonds, Sharing Opportunities

Charlie, a Venezuelan migrant, community theater aficionado, and English teacher-turned-mime works in a corner of Quito’s Parque La Carolina. The park stretches across the city center. For many, it offers a public space to relax and connect. For others, it is a place to earn an income. During the holidays, Charlie takes a break from the park. Much of his family had stayed behind in Venezuela and Charlie needs to remain in touch. Expensive air-time fees mean that WhatsApp offers the best way for Charlie to connect and spread some cheer. During the holidays, he spends hours on WhatsApp sharing tearful greetings and reminiscing with his loved ones. Paying for a

“full” phone plan that included unlimited WhatsApp seemed worth it to Charlie, despite the fact that it cost nearly 10% of his monthly rent.

Rahul, a migrant from India, uses WhatsApp video to chat with his family for up to an hour per day, every day. It allows him to watch his toddler daughter grow up—he left India when she was only one year old.

The practice of using social applications to keep family connections alive has been well researched. Much of the literature cited here focuses on WhatsApp as a vehicle for social cohesion. However, migrant use of WhatsApp for employment referral blurs the line between WhatsApp as a social networking tool and as a critical livelihoods resource.

Take Magali, a Dominican migrant operating a hair salon on a busy thoroughfare in Quito. She left the Dominican Republic after two toxic romantic relationships turned violent and then life-threatening. Before leaving, Magali reached out to her “WhatsApp friend” to secure a job for her in Ecuador. Magali secured more than a job. Using WhatsApp she secured a place to live, negotiated a salary and tipping system, and agreed with her employer on a 60-40 split for hair salon commissions. By the time Magali boarded a plane to Quito, her entire move had been planned down to the last detail. New WhatsApp contacts from a distant friend even helped her to expand her fledgling network in Quito—all before her passport was stamped.

We also found that migrants living in limbo used WhatsApp to create makeshift safety nets. For example, Roberta, a Venezuelan migrant, was married to a man who had failed to find work in Quito. Roberta became bored and depressed. Meanwhile, her “WhatsApp friend” in Chile encouraged her to move there. Still despondent, Roberta spoke with her husband and together they decided that if by the end of the year Roberta were still not pregnant, they would move to Chile. She did become pregnant and they remained in Quito. However, WhatsApp afforded Roberta the confidence that, should the need arise, she could shop around for a more attractive place to settle.

WhatsApp offers an economic lifeline for migrant mobile phone users. For those adapting to a new

7 Mike Butcher (2018). “Here are 25 of the most innovative new projects using tech to help refugees and NGOs,” TechCrunch.

8 GSMA (2017). “The Importance of Mobile for Refugees: A Landscape of New Services and Approaches,” GSMA Disaster Response.

9 ELRHA (n.d.). “Mobile Technology Targeting GBV Among Syrian Adolescent Refugees,” ELRHA.

10 OECD (n.d.). “Strategic Foresight: Making Migration and Integration Policies Future Ready,” OECD.

country, job boards quickly become overcrowded and confusing, and NGO job referrals do not always match migrant skills. By reproducing “word-of-mouth” job interactions, WhatsApp offers a trusted alternative to complicated online referral programs. Most of our respondents indicated that they rarely, if ever, logged onto job forums. One way or another, they trusted that WhatsApp would provide.

The “WhatsApp” Bank: Remittances, Self-Help, and Business Transactions

In Quito, the “Bangladeshi Club” meets once a week, rotating through different Bangladeshi restaurants. Only 25 Bangladeshi migrants live in the city, so it is easy to stay in touch. They use a WhatsApp group chat to coordinate weekly meetings. Besides the food and friendship enjoyed at the gatherings, everyone has the chance to benefit from a communal fund. Each week all members contribute to the fund and should anyone fall on hard times, they can petition the club for a loan.

In Quito, formal financial inclusion — an end state in which everyone enjoys the benefits of a wide choice of financial services — is unavailable to many migrants. As of 2016, Ecuador ranked alongside Venezuela, Argentina, Nicaragua, in terms of lowest use of mobile money services in Latin America.¹¹ The rarity of reliability of robust digital financial services (DFS) in Ecuador pushes migrants to adapt and pursue other strategies. It is worth noting that even those migrants who can access remittances through a bank account depend on WhatsApp to coordinate transactions. As one banked migrant said, “It is because of [my two brothers and parents in India] that I have a business here.” When asked whether he planned on seeing his family soon, he responded: “We will always be connected by WhatsApp.”

Nowhere is the inventive use of WhatsApp clearer than amongst Venezuelan migrants in need of remittance services. Runaway inflation in Venezuela, coupled with tight DFS regulations in Ecuador, encourage creative strategies amongst migrants hoping to send money home. Remittances to Venezuela take three forms: in-kind, cash, or via wire or bank transfer. Migrants least preferred the latter option. Due to severe inflation and perceived corruption in Venezu-

ela, money transferred to Venezuelan banks immediately lost value. Migrants balked at their hard-earned remittance money disappearing in a flash.

Thus, alternative options that rely heavily on WhatsApp have gained traction. Typically, a Venezuelan migrant wishing to send remittances will connect with a Colombian runner through WhatsApp word-of-mouth networks. Over WhatsApp, the migrant and the runner will then set the terms of their agreement. The migrant tells the runner how much they would like to remit. The runner responds with a price for services rendered while adding a bit extra for the bribe they will inevitably pay at the border. The migrant then wires money to the runner in Colombia, who then performs one of two actions: withdraw cash or buy goods.

In the first scenario, the runner takes out cash and hides it in a package to smuggle into Venezuela (where crossing the border with cash is illegal). They then transport the package to the intended recipient. In the second (and more common) scenario, the runner uses the remittance money to purchase essential goods in Colombia. They then ferry the goods across the border or, in some cases, tap agent networks to make the delivery. In both cases, WhatsApp plays an essential role. In-kind remittances require an even deeper level of WhatsApp coordination: the migrant liaises with the recipient and the runner simultaneously to communicate which goods should be purchased and for how much.

WhatsApp also supports business growth, marketing, and development for migrants in Ecuador. Via WhatsApp, Rosa is able to operate her direct-to-order Venezuelan restaurant. Her clients communicate their home-country cravings directly to her. Rosa shops for the ingredients and prepares the meals. In this way, she fills a very specific community niche. She has built a loyal base of clients who depend upon her made-to-order Venezuelan food and WhatsApp Messenger is what made her business succeed.

For migrants who are more established, WhatsApp helps expand their clientele. Mohammed owns a successful Lebanese restaurant franchise in Quito. His savvy use of technology (including marketing via WhatsApp) has catapulted him to success. He

11 The Economist Intelligence Unit and the Alliance for Financial Inclusion (2019). “The Digital Financial Services Ecosystem in Latin America and the Caribbean,” AFI.

takes professional photos of his restaurant, menu, and meals, posting to Instagram, Google My Business, WhatsApp, and Facebook. He even has his own hashtag which is displayed boldly in paint across all of his windows and menus. While paid Facebook advertisements constitute much of his marketing budget, he also highlighted Google and WhatsApp as critical avenues for getting the word out—often by word-of-mouth, replicated online.

What Next?

The centrality of WhatsApp to migrant social, cultural, and economic life in Quito begs the question: Is it *really* necessary to “app-ify” migration? Donor dollars continue to pour into services such as MigApp, which certainly offer some benefits. Yet migrant interactions, at least in Quito, continue to orbit around a free, humble, person-to-person messaging platform. Are NGO and government efforts to develop new applications worth the investment?

Our research offers a simple response—no. This thinking aligns with a small but growing chorus of concerned researchers. A RAND Corporation study of refugee technology use in the Middle East and Greece confirms that migrants rely “mainly on mainstream technology developed for more-general audiences,” and concludes that the influx of applications and “innovations” is simply “too much.”¹² In the Mediterranean, Fletcher research confirmed those findings. Migrants frequently deployed applications designed for non-migrant audiences.¹³ For example, many used applications for maps, currency conversion, language translation, and weather. Some even used an application that predicted wave height and wind velocity, crucial for successful ocean crossings. Facebook was key in reuniting with family and missing traveling companions. Notably, none of these applications were created specifically for migrants.

The RAND researchers recommend that humanitarian and development agencies invest more in working within mainstream platforms and less on developing

niche products. As Culbertson and her colleagues suggest, removing access barriers, scaling internet connectivity, managing data privacy, promoting digital literacy, and improving mobile phone penetration are all productive activities that agencies can do and do well. These are also more urgent needs for migrants. Agencies can do all of these things without inventing new applications whose relevance and technical functionality would overlap with already-popular platforms. Why re-invent the wheel?

We instead recommend that humanitarian organizations work together with migrant self-help groups and understand how applications such as WhatsApp can best serve migrants. They might also help self-help groups expand and focus on capacity-building and sustainable technical support. Additionally, humanitarian agencies should identify “positive deviants”—those who are particularly well-connected or use WhatsApp in innovative ways. How can agencies partner with these leaders to spread important, reliable information about humanitarian services, visas, safety, and finance through existing word-of-mouth channels?

Migrants are the ultimate connectors. Even before the mobile phone boom, diaspora communities formed tight bonds. Migrants have been using technology for years and will continue to do so, but in their own way. Humanitarian agencies claim that new technologies strengthen migrant autonomy, yet they neglect the community-developed online systems that already give migrants agency.

Technology will continue to transform how migrants work, move, and connect. No doubt, off-the-shelf technology has made migration a bit simpler. That is why, as humanitarians our job is not to invent new technology: we will never be able to offer the enduring quality of commercially viable applications, portals, and platforms. Our job, on behalf of migrants, is to help existing technology go the distance.

12 Shelly Culbertson et al. (2019). “Crossing the Digital Divide: Applying Technology to the Global Refugee Crisis,” RAND Corporation.

13 Kim Wilson et al. (2019). “Financial Biographies of Long-Distance Journeyers”, Fletcher School, Tufts University, (See “Screw You, I am Going to Germany,” “Worth the 500 Mile Walk”, and “Your Son Now Has Sex with Old Men.”)

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