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Taking refuge in technology: communication practices in refugee camps and immigration detention

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Introduction

When asylum seekers and refugees are displaced, how do they use communication technologies to maintain links with friends and family during flight and forced migration? When they are detained, what role does technology play in the ways asylum seekers communicate with the 'outside'?

This discussion paper examines an 18-month qualitative pilot study (Leung et al 2009) that explored these questions. The findings of this initial research were then disseminated and reviewed via a workshop with members of refugee communities and those involved in the provision of services and support to refugees (Leung and Finney Lamb 2010).

The pilot study provided an insight into how asylum seekers use communication technologies during conflict, flight, detention and displacement, to maintain links with their families and friends back home, with diasporic networks from their country of origin and with communities in the country where they are seeking asylum. It was also one of the first studies to examine how communication with the outside world occurs in immigration detention centres and to document asylum seeker perspectives on the communication restrictions encountered there.

The aim of the workshop was to identify actions that would support refugees and asylum seekers in using communication technologies in displacement settings. The workshop provided an opportunity for people from refugee communities, advocates, international non-government organisations (NGOs), resettlement services and researchers to come together to discuss potential solutions for refugees. It focused on the experience of refugees and asylum seekers from eastern and western Africa.

While the pilot study investigated immigration detention settings, the workshop concentrated on the use of communication technologies in refugee camp and other displacement contexts, as this was more aligned to the experiences of the workshop participants (Leung 2010).

Background

The study emerged from the author's personal involvement with refugee advocacy groups and in visitor programs to immigration detention centres. As a sociologist of technology, her interest was in how differences in technology- mediated communication occurred in the restrictive environment of immigration detention, compared with other contexts of forced migration, flight and displacement.

As an outsider to the discipline of Refugee Studies, the author observed that studies of refugees contained minimal examination of the role of technology in maintaining connections with family and diaspora in situations of displacement. Instead, the literature within Refugee Studies seemed generally to be in the areas of:

- systems of immigration administration, such as comparison of different methods of managing refugees, particularly between Australia and the UK,

Canada and the USA (see Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission 2004);

- how such systems and policies inform public attitudes towards refugees (see Kushner & Knox 1999; MacCallum 2002; Mares 2002, McMaster 2002);

- the provision of basic health and education services to refugees (see Preston 1991; Hodes 2002; Mares & Jureidini 2003) including the treatment of the psychological effects of family displacement and separation (see Nickerson 2008; Johnson & Stoll 2008; Luster et al. 2009; Senyurekli & Detzner 2008).

The disciplines of Cultural Studies and Global Studies have studied transnational migrants' use of technologies, such as the internet (Graham & Khosravi 2002; Karim 2003; Parham 2004; Bernal 2006), phone cards (Vertovec 2004; Wilding 2006) and mobile phones (Horst 2006). However, there has been minimal consideration of the specific importance of technology to refugees, who are similarly affected by issues of migration and marginalisation.

While migrants generally exploit cheap access to communication technologies to sustain connection with familial and diasporic networks abroad (Baldassar et al 2007), refugees as a subset of this group, do not have the same opportunities as a result of being displaced and uncertain of the whereabouts of their loved ones. Overall, the study of communities and communication practices that surround particular technologies has concentrated on groups other than refugees. A review of literature across both these disciplines has shown the study of:

- technology use by refugees has had minimal investigation;

- the familial and diasporic networks of transnational migrants has infrequently included refugees;
- communities and communication practices that surround particular technologies has concentrated on groups other than refugees.

The few studies that have been undertaken concentrate on the use of a range of technologies by refugees living in resettlement countries. For example, Kabbar and Crump (2006) examined the adoption of the information and communication technologies (ICTs) by refugee immigrants in New Zealand. McIver Jr and Prokosch (2002) explored how various technologies are used for information-seeking by immigrants and refugees in the United States. De Leeuw and Rydin (2007) have conducted research on the ways refugee children represent their cultural identities in the creation of their own media productions.

Research that has focused on specific technologies include Howard and Owens' (2002) study of the internet as a medium for communicating health information to refugee groups. Luster et al. (2009) acknowledged the critical importance of the telephone in reconnecting Sudanese refugees in the United States with their lost families in Africa. Glazebrook (2004) has explored mobile phone use amongst refugees on Temporary Protection Visas in Australia. Riak (2005) has studied how kinship rights of Dinka refugees are enacted through the telephone. Such studies explore how technologies are used where access to and literacies in those

technologies is assumed to be unproblematic and does not fundamentally affect communication practices.

Likewise, the discipline of Internet Studies has analysed online diasporic networks, although this has also neglected asylum seekers and refugees and been confined to a narrow socio-economic demographic within any ethnic minority group. It is often restricted to those who are advantaged in their capacity to become members of a diaspora through economic migration: those who study overseas and remain in the countries in which they were educated, working in the professions for which they have been highly trained (see Mitra 1997; Mallapragada 2000; Melkote & Liu 2000).

Such studies have demonstrated the ways in which feelings of trust, intimacy and community are facilitated online (Preece 1998; Abdul-Rahman & Hailes 2000; Kadende-Kaiser 2000; Henderson & Gilding 2004). Unlike the circumstances of asylum seekers and refugees, these are situations where access is not a critical issue and communication technologies used are ones of choice rather than necessity.

Nonetheless, the latter studies point to the key role of technologies in maintaining emotional wellbeing. The role of technologies in promoting wellbeing has been explored in Eardley, Bruce and Goggin's (2009) review of literature on telecommunications services for disadvantaged groups; O'Mara's (2009) study of using ICTs to empower culturally and linguistically diverse communities; Infoxchange and A.T. Kearney's (2010) report on digital inclusion as a means to social cohesion in low-income areas; Metcalf et al's (2008) article on connecting marginalised young people through technology; and various other studies of how emotional connections are made and sustained online. Such studies of the ways that technology can facilitate individual and community wellbeing have not particularly focused on refugees, and where migrants have been studied, again it is usually in the context of settlement after voluntary migration.

The findings of the pilot study reported in *Technology's Refuge* (Leung et al 2009) confirm that the phone is the main technology used to maintain vulnerable connections with family members in situations of displacement, both in detention and refugee camps. As a result, availability, access and affordability of phone services are fundamental to refugees' emotional wellbeing.

The pilot study

The research questions asked by the pilot study included: How are communication technologies used in the countries of origin, during forced migration and in the settlement process? How are their benefits and limitations perceived? How are relationships of power surrounding these technologies negotiated? What, if any, virtual communities surround these technologies? How does technology assist refugees in sustaining connections with their virtual communities?

Technology's Refuge analysed 30 interviews and 43 surveys with refugees and asylum seekers about their use of communication technology across both contexts of displacement, detention and refugee camps. Participants included:

- male and female refugees or asylum seekers;

- participants from different regions of the world, including Africa, the Balkans, Asia and the Middle East;

- refugees resettled in the Australian community;

- former asylum seekers who had been detained within immigration detention centres;

- adults as well as those who arrived as child refugees.

Study participants were selected to illustrate the broad range of refugee and asylum seeker experiences and perspectives of communication technologies, before, during and after displacement from their home country. Participants were recruited from asylum seeker support networks and refugee communities in Sydney, using a snowballing sampling strategy.

These affiliations were important for gaining access to and the trust of asylum seekers and refugees willing to participate in the research. Snowballing techniques were also used within refugee communities to identify refugees and asylum seekers who met the study criteria and were invited to participate in the research. In addition, a flyer inviting women to be involved in the study was also distributed through a refugee support group.

Surveys were distributed to participants who initially did not elect to do an interview. However, of the 43 survey respondents, 19 went on to give more in-depth insights into their technology use during displacement by granting an interview. The country from which the most survey respondents originated (15 in total) was Afghanistan, although 15 other countries of origin were represented. 25 out of 43 survey respondents had experienced immigration detention, with the majority being from Afghanistan.

Detention periods ranged from as little as several months to five years. More of the male respondents had experience of immigration detention, while more of the female respondents had experience of living in refugee camps in intermediate countries after fleeing from their country of origin and before settling in Australia. Those who had lived in refugee camps had spent anywhere between two and 15 years waiting to be resettled.

27 interviews were conducted, of which two were in mixed group settings with men and women. In total, 15 females and 15 males were interviewed. Interviewees originated from the Middle East (13), Asia (10), Africa (6) and the Balkans (1). All male interviewees had experience of immigration detention, compared with six of the 15 female interviewees. Nine of the 15 women interviewed entered Australia on humanitarian grounds, having spent time in intermediate countries. Male participants who had been detained spent up to five years in immigration detention, while female respondents who had been detained spent up to three years in immigration detention.

An interview schedule was used to conduct the interviews, which contained close-ended and open- ended questions. In addition to this structured interview, unstructured interviewing techniques were used to elicit participant perspectives and stories about their use of communication technologies during displacement from their home country, flight to Australia or an intermediate country, detention and resettlement. All interviews were either extensively noted, or recorded and transcribed. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face; in some instances they took place over the telephone.

Transcripts contained a mixture of stories about the use of communication technologies and participants' perspectives on their use. Reflective field notes were added to the data to aid interpretation. The analysis was conducted in two stages. Initially, Leung summarised each interview in terms of significant events, experiences and stories before passing it onto Finney Lamb for coding and analysis. A coding framework for emergent themes was developed by the authors, followed by final analysis and write up of results.

Detention contexts

Specifically, the pilot study examined the impact of Australia's official policy of mandatory detention on how asylum seekers maintain links to diasporas. Mandatory detention is part of the onshore component of Australia's Special Humanitarian Program (SHP), which offers protection to non-citizens who arrived on Australia's shores, with or without a valid visa, and claim asylum.

Anyone who enters Australian territories without a valid visa purporting to be a refugee escaping from persecution, political instability, war, natural disaster and famine in their home country is immediately detained in an immigration detention centre (IDC) until their claims are verified. Australia's Migration Act 1958 section 189 states anyone who does not have a valid visa must be detained until that person either obtains a visa or leaves Australia.

Official and widespread misperception of refugees as 'queue jumpers' (MacCallum 2002) has been instrumental in enabling the legislative changes requiring mandatory detention of persons arriving in Australia without a visa. Between 1992 and 1994, Australian law moved from permitting (but not enforcing) limited detention of asylum seekers, to a blanket policy of mandatory detention (HREOC 2004), which, at one point, had up to 12,000 individuals in detention (Castan Centre for Human Rights Law 2003, para 4).

While mandatory detention has been part of an explicit strategy aimed at deterring asylum seekers from entering Australian shores, policies relating to asylum seekers' rights while detained have been far less transparent. The conditions of detention centres and the impact of detention on asylum seekers (see the 'National inquiry into children in immigration detention', HREOC 2004) has been closely monitored by quarters and agencies of government (Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade 2002 and HREOC 2004) as well as human rights and refugee advocacy groups (Briskman et al 2008).

The pilot study describes the technologies available and conditions of access in immigration detention centres. It found that the types of technologies available and restrictions to access are shown to constrain communication practices. This was further exacerbated by poor literacy and English language skills, which affected participants' capacity to learn the limited technologies on offer.

Other constraints, such as personal finance, the amount of talk time that could be purchased, rationing of communication resources, practical barriers to 'phoning in' and inequitable access to technologies, are also illustrated. Nonetheless, creative ways of negotiating institutional barriers to technology access and restricted communication with loved ones are highlighted.

Participants reported policies that restricted access to communication technologies were stringent, but being constantly changed. For part of her time in detention during 2000, Ms Q, was not allowed to communicate at all with the outside world. When participants were permitted such communications, the technologies available to them varied according to their detainee status.

Those detained had different resources available to them depending on whether they were in closed detention (where participants were held whilst their cases were initially processed), open detention (or IDC), residential and community detention settings. Across all settings and time, participants described their use of hand-written and printed letters, public pay telephones, fax machines, mobile telephones, text messaging, non-networked computers and computers with internet. Internet use included access to email and broadband video conferencing.

> Mr V was a detainee at the Villawood IDC for five years. His description of the communication technologies in detention illustrates the many changes in access to technology participants experienced over time.
>
> When Mr V arrived in 2002, three payphones were available. However, there were many more people in detention than today, so everyone experienced long queues and waiting times to use them. Four extension phones were available for detainees to receive calls. There was no library or access to books. There was no communal television (unless detainees already had or bought their own through relatives or friends to use in their own rooms). There were two non- networked computers. Faxing was permitted, but only in relation to detainees' cases.
>
> In 2006, communal TV and a gym were provided. At the end of that year, mobile phones without cameras were permitted. At the time of the interview in 2007, there were nine payphones throughout the compound, with two extension phones. There are also six computers in total, of which four have internet access. *(Communication technologies in detention, as described by Mr V in fieldnotes)`*

When restrictive policies were in place, a few participants had communication devices, such as mobile phones or computers, confiscated and locked away. Ms D described having her mobile telephone confiscated when first detained. This was returned to her after restrictions had been lifted.

Arriving in detention, some detainees did not know how to use a phone or phone card and had never used a computer. While 63% of survey respondents had experience of using landline telephones prior to arriving in Australia, only 28% had used mobile phones previously, and as little as 14% had some exposure to computers. Several participants commented that there were no formal lessons on how to use 'new' communication technologies in detention. Rather, participants were taught how to use unfamiliar technologies by fellow detainees, particularly those who spoke their language.

Participant stories also illustrated poor literacy skills and the lack of English made it difficult to learn the technologies available to them. Ms Y had to be taught how to use a phone card by a friend in detention. The simple act of using a phone card for the first time in a detention centre was fraught with problems:

> First you must ring the company then they say a PIN number in English. In English I couldn't understand. After this, when you press the hash key, you just start dialling your phone number. That time I knew how to use the phone card. Before, I didn't know the phone card. In Iran I didn't know the phone card, but I used public phone, I used phone. I had to listen very carefully because I couldn't understand English at that time. *(Ms Y)*

Some detainees did not use computers because they lacked the necessary English. A couple of participants commented that, when they were in the IDC, computers only allowed for English. On the other hand, Ms D learnt English in order to learn to use the computer. She acquired both literacies simultaneously and necessarily as she prepared her case for asylum.

Participants used communication technologies in detention to communicate with family members overseas and in Australia, gain skills for resettlement, keep up with current affairs and correspond with lawyers, police and government bodies.

When they first arrived in detention, participants had expressed an urgent need to contact family members to reassure them they were alive and unharmed. Those successful in making this connection sought to remain in regular contact with family and other loved ones. A couple of participants also kept in contact with family members living in Australia. After phones were introduced into the centre in 2000, Ms Q was better able to stay connected with her younger sister who was released before her. The phone was prominent in interviews as a key technology for contacting family members (firstly the payphone with phone cards and later the mobile, after restrictions on its use were lifted). Letters were also used and later email.

Changes in the policies that regulated the availability and use of communication technology in detention shaped what was possible in communicating with family members overseas. For example, Ms Q spent time in an IDC in 2000. She was not able to contact her family overseas at all during this time because detainees did not have access to phones at the time. However, during 2007, Mr C was able to call his family four to five times per week by payphone or mobile, using $25 of phone cards per week.

While detained, participants used written and electronic media, such as newspapers, television and computers, to learn English, orientate themselves towards Australian society and access information about domestic and international current affairs. Computer facilities were also used for personal entertainment, such as to play computer games, and to become computer literate.

Communication technologies were also used in detention to correspond with lawyers, police and government bodies. This correspondence related to individual legal cases, general requests for information about migration laws, formal complaints and requests for assistance. Mr U wrote letters to immigration authorities requesting information about case law. Participants used computers, printers and fax machines to generate and send formal letters. Mr U also called the police on his mobile phone, while in detention, to report fights and other offences in the detention centre.

Participants encountered a number of difficulties in their attempts to communicate with the outside world. These included constraints on personal finances, the amount of talk time they were able to purchase, rationing of communication resources, practical barriers to 'phoning in' and inequitable access to technologies.

Personal finances, which were kept in an account after they arrived at detention, determined access to communication technologies in detention and ability to buy phone cards:

> We had access to a payphone. I didn't have much money to buy a telephone card and you need to buy a telephone card – if you had money in your account, they could deduct from your account and then pay and you can buy a telephone card. I didn't have that as well. *(Mr R)*

Once detainees had spent any money they possessed, communication privileges could only be gained by working within the IDC. Detainees worked to earn points (each point worth $1), which could be exchanged for goods and services, such as cigarettes, telephone cards. Mr J reported he was able to contact his family with relative ease because he had the means to purchase telephone cards. In contrast, those around him who did not have money had to work for between $8 and $10 a day to be able to buy telephone cards.

Remuneration for detainee's work was minimal. Several participants reported they worked for a week to be able to purchase just one or two items. Mr T described working for six hours per day, seven days a week, in order to earn 35 to 40 points. These points could purchase between $35 and $40, which bought him two packs of cigarettes and two telephones cards. The phone cards would last him up to a week, often less:

> That would last me one week. I was ringing lawyers and everything, trying to get a way out, MPs ... Sometimes two days if I was ringing mobiles and that. *(Mr T)*

Mr T objected to the practice of requiring detainees to work for their communication privileges:

> The thing is they were making us work to get phone cards to ring ... so that's breaking the law ... I mean we should've been paid cash to work to get these phone cards ... With a cleaners job or something you'd make like 30 points which is like two packs of smokes and a $10 phone card ... I also used to be the runner for visits from the time visits started [12noon] to six o'clock, six thirty till I stopped ... My job was to go down and call all the inmates who were detained and call them out to visits ... *(Mr T)*

Several participants observed that it was difficult to earn enough points to purchase everything they wanted. Mr A, for example, did not have enough money to purchase mobile telephone cards as well as everything else that he needed. Participants were limited in the number of phone cards they could purchase due to how much they could earn.

Communication was also restricted by how much talk time participants were able to purchase. The number of phone cards they could afford to purchase and the amount of time available on each card restricted the length of calls and the number of times they were able to make phone contact with their relatives overseas. Participants considered telephone cards in detention to be expensive compared to those that could be obtained outside: the amount of talk time on each card was much lower compared with others that were available. Although this improved over time, detainees did not have the range of choice of phone cards that could be purchased outside detention:

> Seven minutes [to Iran] was $10 – only seven minutes, in detention. They didn't give us another phone call. I missed them so much, I was crying. Just seven minutes. When I came out ... we have a $10 one for 20 minutes. I was so happy, 20 minutes. Now I buy a $10 one and that's 150 minutes. That's much better. *(Ms Y)*

The frustration participants felt at the minimal talk time available to them was evident. Their desired level of contact with family was much higher than that possible with the talk time available in the IDC.

Several participants reported there were insufficient numbers of public telephones in detention. This lead to long queues, fights over telephones and difficulties receiving incoming calls. One participant, Ms X, described IDC officers managing the queues by restricting each detainee's talk time:

> With the phone card it was very quick. And it was a long queue. They said oh okay, you're finished, you can't speak too much, that's it, enough ... If I wanted to ring my family, every day they'd say no. Too many people were there, everybody wants to use it and they don't have too much phone. *(Ms X)*

Mr U described fights between detainees who wanted to make calls when other detainees blocked the payphone for a long time. Long phone calls posed a problem when people were talking on the phone lines that received incoming calls:

Then people had their boyfriends and girlfriends, so in the evening they want to talk to all their family ... they want to make longer phone calls, like one hour, two hours. Then others have to wait and then even those phones' extensions, sometimes you know in the evening people are on the phone for a long time. Someone is saying, but I'm expecting a phone call, my lawyer will call, can you hang up the phone? *(Mr U)*

Detainees experienced rationing of their computer and internet use. As there were a limited number of computers provided for detainees, they were over-subscribed and this resulted in queuing. Whilst Mr A was in detention, there were four computers available for between 300 and 400 people. IDC officers managed computer queues by a formal booking system, restricting the amount of time for each person. Detainees were permitted to use a computer for one hour per day. Mr B described the schedule for internet use at Villawood in 2007 as follows:

8am to 12 noon: open access
12 noon to 1pm: closed for lunch
1pm to 2pm: women only
2pm to 8pm: Stage II detainees
8pm to 2am: open access

Participants reported hours of queuing were required to take one's turn. For example, if Mr B queued during open access hours (8pm–2am) and was fifth in the queue, he would not be able to take his turn until 1am:

> Yeah computers are not enough but when I want to use, so I must waiting sometimes six hours and seven hours ... Because heaps of people, 254 people or so just to use the computer. There is a card queuing system, whereby if you want to use the computer, you put your card in a line behind the last person in the queue. *(Mr B)*

Ms D did not use the internet facilities in detention at all because the queues were so long. However, a couple of participants told of getting up early in the morning or staying up until after midnight in order to access computers regularly:

> Well what happens is we have to sort of like queue up for them. So the reason why I use it every once a day is because I have to wake up early, by maybe seven to get to a computer by eight to get a chance to use the computer. *(Mr A)*

People encountered practical barriers when 'phoning in' to contact someone in detention. It was difficult for friends to get through to detainees if the lines were always busy or detention centre officers were unable to locate them in the compound. Callers who do not speak English had particular difficulty telephoning IDCs and asking to speak with someone.

> You cannot use that landline as communication. Your name will be announced, you are in the shower and shower is going in full speed, you will not be able to hear anything. You are sleeping maybe or you are

listening to television ... You are listening to radio ... You are talking or chatting with some of your fellow detainee friends, you will not be able to listen. So tell me if you're not standing near the phones how you will be able to receive your phone calls? *(Mr U)*

Similarly, Mr R described the difficulties and frustration he experienced when trying to contact a resident in Curtin detention centre from outside the centre:

I had to contact him every fortnight and sometimes he contacted [me] because it was very difficult to get through to him because either the line was busy or the immigration officer did not call him. It was quite frustrating waiting for a few minutes to get him and mostly I couldn't reach him ... Most of the time, when I contacted Curtin detention centre, I was left on hold for a few minutes and it cost me money, therefore I needed to hang up. *(Mr R)*

Participant accounts suggest the culmination of IDC's restrictive policies resulted in inequitable access to communication technologies between detainees, across the different sections of the IDC and between men and women.

On initial arrival in Australia participants were put in closed detention. This was the most restrictive setting described by participants. They were not able to use the telephone and had no access to other communication technologies, such as the computer. To a few participants this policy appeared to be applied arbitrarily; no explanation was given for decisions. Ms X reported being unsure why communication access policies differed across the various sections of the IDC in which she was detained or why, after five months, policies seemed to change to allow telephone use:

They didn't talk to us to say okay this is the rule. When we need to talk we just say to an officer can we use the phone. And we don't know if there is a rule or if we need to ask the higher people. And he'd say oh okay maybe, maybe not. *(Ms X)*

Restrictive policies in closed detention prevented participants from meeting their most pressing, immediate communication need upon arrival was letting their family know they were safe and alive. The main closed detention barrier to contacting family was the policy that prevented detainees from using the phone. Ms Y was kept in closed detention for about three or four months. Phone calls were not permitted. She was offered alternative means of contacting her family, but these were not feasible:

They told us, we don't let you ring your family. You can fax your family that you are safe. My husband and I said: we don't have a fax in our family home in Iran. In Iran they had fax at that time but only in offices, like in government offices – not all offices. We said no, we have to ring them. They said no ... *(Ms Y)*

Ms Y was offered a choice to send letters to her parents to tell them she was alive, but did not trust the guards to actually send the letter:

Because I don't believe the people who are working there, to give them a letter to send out. They said, write a letter, give it to us, and we'll send it for you. We didn't believe it; we didn't trust them. *(Ms Y)*

Similarly, two participants who spent time detained in residential housing described residential housing as having more restrictive communication policies than IDCs: no access to internet or email was provided. Mr C reported detainees who purchased their own computers had the modems confiscated to prevent internet access. Mr A commented on the greater restrictions on telephone use in residential housing:

Actually in residential we had no internet ... So, it was actually difficult to communicate with my friends or any family that I have in Australia ... Yes so like for the phone calls we had a phone in the house but the phone could only make, maybe only to landlines and not to any mobiles. This was in Sydney. So if I have a relation or maybe a friend who's out of Sydney, it was absolutely impossible to call them. *(Mr A)*

Mr C said in residential housing he was no longer able to access email to send messages to his family, and was not allowed back into mainstream detention to access the computer room there. He explained that, even where detainees purchased their own computers, the modems were stripped out by the guards to prevent internet access. No webcams or tape recorders were allowed.

In contrast, Mr P, who had been released into community detention, described fewer restrictions on his use of communication technologies and a greater sense of independence in technology use: '*Actually I can do everything I want to, but when I was in detention, I cannot do nothing. Everything I want I call my friend to help me, to bring in.*'. He was able to use a mobile telephone, which had been forbidden in the IDC. He also reported having internet access, including the ability to use broadband video conferencing. The cost-effectiveness of the internet video meant he was able to use the internet daily for an hour or more to speak with his family. This dramatically increased the level of contact he has had with his family, compared with having phone contact in detention: '*I talk with my family and sometimes I just teach my daughter to study a little bit English.*'

One participant was concerned polices within the IDC created inequitable access to communication technologies between women and men. Mr U described how women had an earlier curfew than men, because they were housed in a women-only dormitory that was locked down at night. This limited the time available to women to access telephones and the computer centre. Mr U described this policy as a cost-saving measure on the part of the IDC administrators, allowing fewer guards to be rostered to supervise the women's dormitory. In Mr U's view, it denied women equal access to the computer room:

So women will be staying in a very small place denying their access to the computer centre and other places. Whereas, many detainees have all sorts of privileges, they can hang around 4 o'clock in the morning in their room and have a cigarette, they would have that privilege and women will be locked. *(Mr U)*

Participants commented on restrictions from a number of perspectives: the deprivation of legal rights, lack of access to technologies that support education, fear of surveillance and suspected obstruction or sabotage. Several participants remarked restricted access to communication technologies deprived them of access to legal information needed to prepare their cases:

> I think they should have given everyone the migration book [copies of the Migration Act]. The internet in there would have been much easier and having your own private conference room with your lawyers. *(Mr T)*

Mr U recounted going on a hunger strike in order to obtain a copy of the Migration Act.

Several participants felt access to communication technologies that could be used for educational and informational purposes was limited. However, access to such communication technologies changed over time. Mr R actively sought ways to gain skills to prepare him to settle in Australian society, such as improving his levels of English literacy or familiarizing himself with Australian culture. However, in detention in 2001, he found it difficult to access technologies that would allow him to do this: the number of televisions provided was not sufficient for the detainee community and there were no newspapers. At this stage no books or computers were allowed.

Participants commented on the role of the internet in opening up the possibility of education and communication. Mr P advocated access to the internet in detention so detainees can obtain educational material and access current affairs in their own language. He found television and radio alone did not keep him informed, since he could not always fully comprehend English language news reports.

Mr A observed the limits imposed on internet use minimised its capacity to support more sophisticated learning and education. He found many online activities he had participated in prior to coming into detention were censored in the IDC:

> [I]t's been very hard because with the internet here, it's blocked, some of the websites they have blocked. Say for instance, they have things like educational websites; websites related to anything to do with foreign nation situations. Anything to do with research or anything is blocked and we only have access to the basics like the newspapers within Australia and the email and the chat. But sometimes the chat when you try to access it's blocked too. *(Mr A)*

Not only was the internet censored by detention centre management, the restrictive communication environment led participants to censor themselves. Participants were discouraged from using the phone because they feared surveillance in the detention centres. Mr R observed it was a commonly assumed phone calls were monitored by detention centre officers: *'Another problem that we thought we were under surveillance and our phone conversations were recorded, so people were very reluctant to call families and friends.'*

Ms X feared the government in her home country would listen to phone conversations with her family members. When phoning her family from the detention centre, she was very self-conscious about what she could discuss, ensuring she did not reveal her whereabouts:

> I wasn't saying where I was because we were scared that on the other line maybe the government was listening. Maybe just imagination, but we were scared to say where we were. We'd just say we are alright, we are here, we are good, our health is good. Mostly I was saying I need this, I need this, make a list, take the pen and paper, write down, send for me. But that was the only thing we were saying. *(Ms X)*

Several participants suspected that, in addition to the restrictions imposed on their communication in detention, access to communication technologies was deliberately obstructed by detainee officers. They perceived this as a form of control and victimisation of detainees. Participants reported letters and parcels were monitored or policed. For example, Ms Y asked her mother to send Iranian food to the detention centre, but discovered that the parcel had been intercepted by management and not given to her when it arrived. Ms X suggested letters and parcels, which were a source of joy for detainees, were held up for long periods of time by the detention centre officers:

> All the letters and parcels, the officer said they need to check them, to see them, then they give them to us. Maybe that's why it took a long time. Many people, many letters and parcels ... Some of them [officers] don't care that we were very sad and would love to have a letter. They don't care. *(Ms X)*

Mr U believed IDC management deliberately obstructed detainee correspondence by preventing access to technologies or failing to maintain them, such as printer ink cartridges not being deliberately replaced to prevent detainees from printing letters. Similarly, he believed faxes sent to detainees were deliberately withheld from them, and officers were purposely obstructive if detainees wished to send faxes out. Practical barriers he and other detainees faced using the public phone system were perceived as evidence of purposeful obstruction:

> Our phone was disrupted deliberately I would say that it was designed – there is a phone system in detention, what is deliberately designed to deprive the detainees from phone calls or not to get phone calls very easily. What they are doing, they are announcing ... and that is very vague and you might be in the toilet and the time you run from your room, maybe you're living far away from the telephone, the telephone line cuts off ... *(Mr U)*

> I tell you, 200 detainees and all of them trying to make a phone call to their lawyer, family, friends, and there are four phones, two of them broken down. Most of the time, half of those phones are broken down. I was suspecting – although you could call me paranoid, but I was suspecting there is something very sinister going on because always two phones are broken down. I mean, this is very suspicious, that's very

suspicious. I have no evidence that it's deliberate, but that looked very suspicious ... *(Mr U)*

A couple of participants perceived the restrictions imposed by IDC officers as an effort to control, victimise or disempower them. Mr U's experience with the telephone system described above led him to conclude IDC officers deliberately manipulated communication technologies to punitively deprive detainees of a means of communication and make them feel lonely and powerless. Similarly, Mr R believed restrictions were designed to control detainees by restricting access to information and news from the outside world and keeping them in ignorance:

> So there's this control in detention centres that people are kept in the dark and they are not allowed any technology to use or know what is happening. Because we were curious about what was happening inside Australia, what people think of us ... *(Mr R)*

Participants employed work-around strategies surrounding technology to protect privacy, respond to fears of surveillance and negotiate obstacles to communication. They used mobile phones as a fallback communication method, adopted one-way communication strategies, engaged intermediaries, broke rules, received help from technology brokers, shared resources and fought for communication rights.

Some participants were able work with the communication technologies on offer to conceal their detention from relatives overseas whom they did not want to worry. Mr and Mrs W, who did not want to let their family abroad know they were in detention, would phone late at night so the background noise would not give away their environment. Similarly, Mr T limited the number of calls he made to his family in Australia, so as to purposefully not burden them with the issues he was facing in detention.

Mr C commented he preferred to use the internet rather than phone his family in detention; that is, he found asynchronous interactions with the recipient more suitable. Since being detained, his mental health had deteriorated. The internet allowed him to plan what he wanted to say before he typed. There were less pressures on time and recall associated with the internet than with real-time phone conversations: *'When we call up when we talk sometime, the mind is not working ... Like the whole thing is can't remember'.*

Mobile phones and letters were used as contingent communication methods in detention because of the frustration participants experienced in using the payphone. A couple of participants chose to use letters to pass on personal news to their family instead of phoning them:

> [W]ith the phone card it was very quick. And it was a long queue. They said oh okay, you're finished; you can't speak too much, that's it, enough. I was happier with the letter. It was much better than calling them. *(Ms X)*

Once permitted in detention, mobiles were used for convenience: it made it much easier for friends to contact detainees. For example, Ms D explained she could talk to her friends in her room and there was not the elaborate procedure of having to be

called to the phone and found within the compound. Having a mobile phone ensured that her friends could get in touch with her in an emergency.

Several participants commented that, once mobile phones were permitted, almost all detainees had their own. Mr U claimed mobile phones had revolutionized detainees' communication practices:

> [A] mobile phone would be so crucial for receiving phone calls from outside world ... Access to the mobile phone actually attach the detainees to the outside world more, I would say a thousand times more ... *(Mr U)*

> I would say how mobile phone is better than payphone. You don't have money so if you have mobile phone, someone else can call you and they can pay for the call. You will still be receiving phone calls, regardless wherever you are, you will not be missing out now if you're not able to call ... Now, you have seen how many [mobile] phones there are and how many detainees. You will see now all the [pay] phones are free because all the detainees have got their own mobile phone, so no one use payphone anymore. But you know a time there was I had waited two hours to make a phone call because there are queues ... *(Mr U)*

The adoption of one-way communication methods, in which one party took primary responsibility for initiating and financing communication, enabled participants to navigate the practical barriers to communication in detention. Since it was impractical to get a call through to the detention centre on public payphones, relatives and friends relied on detainees to make contact using their phone card. However, these expectations were reversed for the use of mobile phones. In this case, detainees relied on friends and relatives to contact them on their mobiles, because it was too expensive for them to afford to phone out. Several participants reported the use of mobiles to receive incoming calls had become the main way detainees remained in contact with the outside world.

Both types of one-way communication could be used simultaneously. For example, Mr A could not earn enough points to recharge his mobile phone; he therefore relied on friends to get in contact with him on his mobile. If this did not occur, he would have to use his phone card to contact them on the payphone.

Friend and visitors acted as messengers and couriers on the behalf of participants. Those who were situated in closed detention or residential housing asked other detainees in open detention, where access to communication technologies was less stringent, to act as messengers for them. Mr J acted as a broker on behalf of other detainees whilst in detention. New arrivals put in closed detention without access to a phone would ask him to call their family for them.

Following his release, he also remained in touch with detainees. He gave them his mobile number and passed on messages to their families on their behalf. Similarly, when Mr C was placed in residential housing, he relied on friends who were still detained in the mainstream IDC to send emails to his family on his behalf. He no longer had access to the internet and was not permitted to visit the IDC to use the computer centre.

Friends from outside of the detention centre could also act as messengers. Mr R explained that, whilst he had access to a payphone in detention, he did not have any money in his account to purchase a phone card. He had to rely on intermediaries to establish contact with a friend outside of detention whom he knew in Australia. He asked this friend to pass on a message to his family:

> It was common. Everybody did it. Despite the concern that they were put in a detention centre, people were very clever and knew how to communicate and how to get by, how to get their message passed through to people in Australia, to families. I had a friend who was in Australia and I told him – if he could call my family, let them know that I am in here; I have arrived in Australia in detention, so they shouldn't worry. So he contacted my family. *(Mr R)*

Family members did not always believe the intermediaries who were deployed to pass on these messages. While in closed detention, Ms Y asked a fellow detainee who was to go into open detention to phone her mother. However, her family members could not believe she would be unable to access a phone and were suspicious at the motives of the person calling on her behalf: 'I gave him a number but my mum didn't believe it. She said: *'Why doesn't she ring me? What happened to her? She is in Australia – everybody has phones.'*

Visitors were also used as couriers. Mr and Mrs W asked former detainees to pass a letter onto friends, who in turn could send it to their family. It was not possible to write a return address on the envelope without the family finding out they were in a detention centre.

Several stories indicated participants chose to break the detention centre rules to access communication technologies. A pregnant woman (Ms Y) secretly sneaked under the fence from closed to open detention during the night to use the telephone to call her mother overseas. Mr C resorted to underhand means by which to access legal information that was denied to him, then used the photocopier; he 'pinched' a copy of the 1958 Migration Act and photocopied it in the IDC library:

> Before they don't allow us to read that book, they don't give us. But I work in the library. Somebody gave me then I pinch. Then I try make a copy then I give all the people, all the detainee. *(Mr C)*

Prior to mobiles being permitted, Mr U smuggled one into the detention centre:

> So what we did, we were lucky enough to smuggle some mobile phones inside detention ... then I stopped working actually when I got a mobile phone and I got some visitors who were kind enough to pay for my prepaid credit sometimes ... All I had to do, always hide my mobile, I keep it in vibrator mode. *(Mr U)*

Some participants claimed not all of these activities went completely unnoticed by guards. They reported detention officers either turned a 'blind eye', or were complicit with detainee requests to bend the rules. Mr C claimed mobile phones were used in detention before they were officially allowed and detention officers would turn a

blind eye: *'Some officer they know we had a mobile. They are very cooperate, they don't say anything ... Most officer they ignore, they know, they say oh you have mobile.'*

Mr R related one incident in which a guard bent the rules and acted as a broker in providing him with access to a newspaper:

> There was another guard in the detention centre and he was reading the Western Australian newspaper, and I questioned if he could lend me his newspaper to me when he finished it. He said, 'No I can't give you my newspaper', so I said 'Why?' And he said, 'Well this is another rule here'. I was quite sad. I think that I was visible in some way, that I feel sad and frustrated about his rejection. He came to me after about an hour and gave it to me and said in a quiet voice that you need to bring it back to me. And that was it. *(Mr R)*

Personal friends or visitors to detention acted as brokers by helping detainees to access technology they had no means of purchasing themselves. This included mobile phones, computers, books, payphone cards and prepaid credit for mobile phones.

Brokers also filled a gap by providing detainees with communication devices. Ms D was given a laptop by a friend, but was unsure how many other detainees had their own laptops which they were able to use in their room. Mr R was also able to obtain books with which to learn English from a woman who set up a business selling things to detainees:

> There was a woman who brought stuff and sold it inside to the detention centre, and I asked my friend to buy me a dictionary, and he bought me a dictionary, and then I asked this woman if she could bring some books for me ... She brought a few books for me, second hand books, and one was Gone with the Wind and it kept me busy sometimes, reading that. *(Mr R)*

Detainees shared resources. When mobiles were contraband in detention, the few that had been smuggled into the detention centre were in demand. Mr C described how these new owners were obligated to share their mobile with others:

> Before, some people need it, we can't say no, we give them to everyone and the phone become idle ... Because some people tell me oh he's a good friend, how can you say no, and how can you ask money from them? *(Mr C)*

Brokers also bought detainees telephone cards and prepaid credit for their mobile phones. Visitors gave detainees phone cards during a visit or passed on the PIN number over the phone. This enabled detainees who had no other means to purchase phone cards access to the phone. It provided additional talk time for detainees who were constrained by how much they could earn in detention. It also released one participant from needing to do the menial work required to earn these communication privileges.

Participants agitated for change to the communication restrictions, by requesting personal concessions – for example, being granted the privilege of having a computer in their room – or by advocating for the lifting of broader restrictions to communication. A couple of participants claimed the changes made to detention centre communication policies could be attributed to advocacy action. Mr A believed the educative potential of the internet rendered its access a communication right of detainees. He argued internet access was eventually introduced as a result of pressure from detainees as well as external organisations:

> Cos it's a right to have – it's a right to community to be able, you know, to have access to the outside world. But before the introduction of the internet and mobiles, we had very limited, no contact with Australian community ... We should be given more access to normal life. More access to and links to the community. Because, look at it this way – we have hopes of living in the community. So to be able to integrate into society that you don't even know is very hard. So I think more links with the society sooner that would help in a way that if you go or leave would be able to adapt better. *(Mr A)*

Mr U was actively involved in fighting for detainee rights. This involved making requests for legal information, performing hunger strikes and threatening legal action against detention centre management. He claimed a large responsibility for the fight to have access to mobile phones; he wrote a letter to the detention centre manager, threatening court action: *'First I wrote a letter to the DIMIA manager asking him some explanation ... If you have any case law, could you please refer to me those case laws or legislations please?'*. Mr U firmly believes that only the court system is effective in upholding detainees' communication rights:

> I was encouraging the detainees to document their incidents more because the ombudsman doesn't want to accept any complaint if it is not well documented. They did not explain to us how a detainee will be having these skills of documentation... Most of the detainees I discovered, including me, do not have any experience of administrative work. *(Mr U)*

Mr U feels the next step is to fight for detainees to be able to have cameras, recorders, and their own personal computers with in-built modems, and he coaches others in making complaints.

In summary, participants' experiences of immigration detention indicate policies concerning communication privileges and technology access were inconsistent and variable across time and detention settings. Participant accounts of detention date from 1999 to 2008, and from detention practices which allowed no communication whatsoever with the outside world, then limited contact through public payphones, through to permitting personal mobile phones with stringent conditions.

It is clear that the phone, whether public or personal, has been the key in keeping detainees connected with family and friends outside of detention. Nonetheless, restricted access and use of communication technologies in detention resulted in all being over-subscribed and constantly in demand. This is despite no formal tuition being provided in the use of these technologies, women having less access than the

men, and access being biased towards those who had personal finances and did not need to earn their access by working under the points system.

While these constraints were seen by participants as institutional victimisation, conversely the provision of technology access and communication rights was regarded as vital to emotional well-being. However, the evidence suggests that such rights are more difficult to exercise in immigration detention in comparison to refugee camps because availability, access and affordability of technologies are explicitly denied.

Refugee camp and other displacement contexts

Interviews with participants about communication in situations of conflict and dislocation highlighted the obstacles they encountered in staying in touch with family and friends and the strategies they employed to work around these problems. Communication practices were often contingent upon limited or unreliable telephone and postal services. Whilst in flight or in refugee camps, use of such compromised telecommunications or mail services required money, which participants stated they generally did not possess. Unable to meet the costs of technology use, participants would have to ask favours of personal and professional contacts to broker access to technologies to enable them to contact family and friends.

Stories demonstrated that limited or unreliable communication infrastructures within countries of origin and being in transit can restrict the options available for communication. War and violence can disrupt communication by damaging existing communication infrastructures and disconnecting telephone lines. During conflict in Sudan, government sanctions on telecommunications in Khartoum contributed to the difficulties Ms O had contacting her siblings there.

Ms M was originally from Bosnia, a country with a good telecommunications infrastructure, but the telephone lines were disconnected during the war. When her parents sent her away to live with extended family in another country, she communicated sporadically with her parents over a number of years by satellite phone and letters:

> It was very hard. Mostly it was just phone. I don't know, it's very hard to describe because during the war, they had to go to a special place to call us, and it wasn't like a normal telephone line, because all the lines were disconnected. My hometown was in siege for ... two or three years. So it was a bit hard and we didn't communicate often. It was just from time-to-time that we would talk to them. We would write them letters. *(Ms M)*

Ms Q, who left Iraq in 1999, recounted that national economic hardship in Iraq had led to limited telecommunication services. The landline phone services were unreliable and could be unavailable for several days at a time:

> Everybody needed this way of communication ... at that time we were struggling because the line was not good enough, and the landline most of the time was busy or would get connected with other lines. So it wasn't a

quite good service. We really depend on it to talk. We have no other options, no mobile, no internet, no nothing ... because it was a bad time – the economy of Iraq was very bad. So that all affected everything in life and also the communication service. So sometimes we have no line at all. It stops for one or two days, and that stops also any communications for no reason. *(Ms Q)*

In addition, she did not use the postal service because in Iraq it was unreliable:

Even the post was bad. Myself, I didn't write letters because the postal service is not as good and the letter will either go or not. So why would we bother writing the letter. But I think some people do if they are in such a place with no landline service at all. There is no option, only the letter. But also the letter is delayed and maybe it's risky. It will get there or not. *(Ms Q)*

In refugee camps, participants' communication with the outside world was restricted by limited access to phones and postal services. Ms H told of her experience in a refugee camp in Guinea:

I was in Guinea in a refugee camp and I had family members back home in Liberia and if I was talking to them, they – I mean, there's no mobile, they got no phones ... The only means of communicating with them was writing a letter and it's not the system here where I have to drop it in a mailbox and it just went. *(Ms H)*

For the entire eight years she spent in the refugee camp in Kenya, Ms I did not have contact with her family. There was a telephone at her refugee camp in Kenya, but the cost was prohibitive.

Several participants explained that, in the refugee camp where they had been, mobile phones were the only means of communication, but only a few refugees owned phones. Mobile network coverage in Ms O's refugee camp made receiving incoming calls difficult. She would have people call her friend's place because there was known network coverage there. If she wanted to call someone, she would have to stand on top of the hill.

In situations of displacement, personal access to money can restrict communication. Some participants, while in refugee camps, were unable to buy mobile phones or stamps because of limited access to money; it was only those who were wealthy or who owned businesses in the camp who managed to purchase mobile phones. Ms I commented that mobile phones were generally only available to those who had money sent to them: *'But if you don't have somebody out there who can get you money to buy a mobile, you can't get that money to buy the mobile.'*

During flight to another country, access to money was particularly limited. This influenced communication choices. Like others, Ms Y was able to stay in contact with her family during flight by using public telephones. However, in the 60 days she spent in Indonesia, she could afford only two phone calls. The expense of mobile phones

was also raised by Ms Q, who explained that, although mobile phones were available in Jordan (intermediate country), they were not a priority; landlines were a cheaper alternative:

> But I myself I didn't buy one there because I was just busy for the looking to find a way. Because there is nothing in my mind at that time but to come to Australia. I have to look for ways that I'm coming. Me and my family. So we don't want to spend anything. We talk using landline because there was a landline in my flat that I rented. So I can't remember that I used mobiles. *(Ms Q)*

Cultural norms of access and use of communication technologies further constrained communication. In the refugee camp in Khartoum, Ms O had privileged access to communication technologies because she worked for a non-government organisation (NGO) there. However, her new skills in using email and the computer did not help her in communicating with family and friends:

> I got training in 2003. I can't send emails to those people, they can't read it. They don't know how to use computers. And the computer, I don't have it at home – unless you go to cafe. Like you pay $100 and then use it for specific periods of time. *(Ms Q)*

As a result of these obstacles, participants had to 'make do' with the communication options available to them. This not only entailed living within the constraints imposed by these obstacles, but employing work-around strategies for communicating with family and friends, such as favours and brokers to access communication technologies they did not own, and using messengers or couriers to negotiate the communication obstacles encountered. When all else failed, participants travelled to see family or friends or relied on news bearers and rumours to obtain information about them.

Participants who did not own communication technologies relied on brokers who could provide access to phones or provide them with internet access. Agencies and non-government organisations (NGOs) acted as brokers by allowing employees and voluntary workers to access their communication technologies for personal use. Ms O observed employment agencies gave employees access to communication resources and this provided a critical communication link between people in Khartoum, Sudan, and Nairobi, Kenya:

> It takes long for them to get the information unless some people are working in an organisation in Nairobi. And then when they had the information they used a telegraph, sent it to one of those who work in the offices in Khartoum. Then they get the information of those people – their parents passed away and all that. At that time life was very hard. No communication. *(Ms O)*

Similarly, Mr C could only contact his wife back at home at her workplace because she did not have a home phone. However, this meant that they sometimes had a limited time to talk:

> Phones quite expensive and sometimes because in my home we don't have a phone. That's only for her office, and the office times I ring and sometimes they busy and it's very hard to ring from the office. Something, there's only a few minute to talk and they stop then because boss got angry because they had the business, business call coming and we can't talk much. *(Mr C)*

For Ms O, voluntary work resulted in 'privileged access' to communication technologies. An NGO, for whom she did voluntary work in the refugee camp in which she lived, funded her studies; this gave her some access to a library and computers. The NGO also allowed her to use their two-way radio, which she found to be preferable to using a mobile phone in the refugee camp:

> Radio better because if you are there you will get the information faster and better. But mobile phone, the problem is network. You have to go to certain places and get up where there is network and start talking. But with radio we had an office like this so you could communicate. Also free, without any card. It is free. Because this organisation offers that for like half an hour you can talk to people. There is a restriction – provided that there is no politics in what you are talking about. Because it should be accessed anywhere. So you can't talk anything about the government or whatever. You're asking your people in Sudan and Uganda, how their health is only... And when mobile comes in the use of radio is going down. The rate of radio users has gone down. Another thing with radio, you can't talk – like somebody saying I love you, and all of us in the office will hear. With mobile it's only in your ear and that's that. *(Ms O)*

Humanitarian agencies also had a role in hand-delivering letters in situations of conflict. Ms M recounted that the Red Cross hand-delivered letters with emergency supplies. Luster et al. (2009) noted this was the only formal avenue available to asylum seekers and refugees, amongst numerous informal strategies for sustaining connection with family members.

Private phones were also rented out for public use. Several participants reported this to be common in refugee camps where they had stayed. Ms O explained the introduction of the mobile phone into refugee camps heralded schemes for those who owned a mobile phone to make money by charging those who did not own a mobile phone to use them:

> So you go to them who have a mobile, you buy the card, you put it in, and then if you have a brother or a sister outside here then you ring and make an appointment with the person who has got the phone. Tomorrow or whatever time, come here. At that time I will call. Then at that time you will ring and you won't talk long. Because you don't have money you buy in (the year) 2000, one minute or two minutes. *(Ms O)*

Resource sharing could also occur. Ms F was separated from her husband for six years after he first came to Australia. During this time, he phoned monthly, sometimes more frequently. The family did not have a phone in their own home; they

relied on the owner of the building in which they lived for access to a phone to receive her husband's calls.

Participants relied on intermediaries to act as messengers and couriers for them. In some cases this was done as a favour; in others, people were paid to act as couriers or messengers. Ms H paid for the hand-delivery of letters and emails to be sent from her refugee camp. Both were expensive in relation to the cost of living:

> I can remember once I decided to send an email to Liberia, back home to my brother and I asked someone who had email address, can you please send this email for me and I just wrote it, gave it to them and they use their email address to send it because I didn't have one ... and I have to pay the price. *(Ms H)*

In contrast, Ms I had to ask someone to courier a letter for her, but she did not know whether or not it would reach the recipient:

> If you have no money to buy the stamp, you just wait and give someone who is going there [but] ... with that person, you don't know that letter will reach the person or not. *(Ms I)*

Ms O described a system by which letters were sent between Sudan and Nairobi in Kenya with a community member who travelled between cities for their work with NGOs, in this case, the World Food Program: *'When he's coming you will see him with heaps of letters, when he's going, heaps of letters. That's the only way.'*

When there was no means of contacting their family, participants travelled to see them, or relied on news bearers travelling from the same region in which their family lived to glean news of them. Ms L escaped her home country as a child, and went to live in a refugee camp on her own in another African country. She only heard where members of her family had fled through word of mouth. While she heard rumours about the fate of her family, she had no means to visit or contact them.

Ms O recounted having difficulty remaining in touch with her parents in Nairobi, Kenya and whilst in Khartoum, Sudan, because roads had been blocked by the war. She was unable to communicate with or travel to see her family. As a result, she had to rely on those who had come from the same region as her family to glean any news about her relatives:

> Because of the war, the roads are blocked, no communication. So it's very hard to reach our family. If someone comes from your area, comes visiting to Khartoum, we all come to ask whether our parents are alive. You ask, they are dead – you don't even know. *(Ms O)*

In summary, some participants referred to and utilised formal Red Cross services in their attempts to keep in contact with family members. However, overwhelmingly the strategies used were informal. Accessibility to technologies was hampered by war and damaged or diminished telecommunications infrastructures. Access to the most basic of technologies, such as phone and postal services, was also compromised by the cost to use them. The demand to use these communication technologies led to the

formation of micro-economies, in which use and access was possible only through personal or professional contacts, and/or payment.

The workshop

As *Technology's Refuge* was a pilot study and exploratory in nature, it was important to verify the findings following the launch of the report. Refugee communities, advocates, international non-government organisations, resettlement services and researchers were invited to a community workshop that would disseminate the report's findings and identify potential solutions and actions that will support refugees and asylum seekers' use of communication technologies in displacement settings and during resettlement in Australia. The workshop focused on the experience of refugees and asylum seekers from Eastern and Western Africa. Participants came from a variety of backgrounds, including six participants from African nations.

A2-sized posters were created to summarise the key findings of the report as it related to three central questions. These were used as talking points and to guide discussion on the day. One of the key questions, discussed further below, was 'How can we help refugees communicate during war, in flight and in refugee camps?'

Workshop participants who had lived in countries in Africa generally agreed that the challenges summarised in *Technology's Refuge* and the workshop posters were ones they or members of their communities had faced.

The following table is a simplified overview of one of the posters presented at the workshop, and which served as a prompt for discussion.

Communication challenge	**Illustrative quotes and Stories**
Challenge 1: Accessibility in refugee camps: Some camps had no public phone. Mobile phones were owned only by the 'wealthy' few. Poor mobile network coverage made receiving incoming calls difficult. It was difficult to earn money in the camp to afford to communicate.	'People who owned mobile phones rented them out.' 'If I wanted to call someone, I had to stand on top of the hill.' 'I relied on my landlord to access a phone to receive my husband's calls.'
Challenge 2: Postal services in refugee camps: Some camps have no postal service.	'If you have no money to buy the stamp, you just give it to someone who is going there. But will it reach them?' 'The Red Cross hand-delivered letters with emergency supplies'.
Challenge 3: Affordability: Some people could not afford to own a phone. It was difficult to earn money in refugee camps to be able to afford to communicate.	'We had a two way radio in the office and it was free.'
Challenge 4: Communicating on the run:	'When we arrived in Jordan, we

Whilst in flight, refugees wanted to let their family know that they were alive and safe. The public phone is a common way to communicate while fleeing. There is limited money and few calls.	contacted our family to tell them we were safe, then again when we reached Malaysia and again in Indonesia.'
Challenge 5: Surveillance: Some people were worried that their family or friends were under surveillance by their enemies. They feared the post could be intercepted or phone calls recorded.	'I didn't even write a letter, I did not feel it was safe for them.' 'I wasn't saying where I was because we were scared that the government was listening.'
Challenge 6: Staying connected to family: Some refugees could not communicate with their family because no-one had a phone. Some participants lost touch with family members if they went into hiding. Refugees can feel distressed if there is no news.	'I have a sister who visited from Khartoum. She's the one who knew where my parents were.' 'If someone comes to visit Khartoum from our area, we all come to ask whether our parents are alive – you don't even know.' 'I heard rumours about where the rest of my family had gone, but I had no way to contact them.'
Challenge 7: Disconnected phone lines: Phone lines and infrastructure can be destroyed by war. Government bans on communication can stop people using the phone.	'During the war, they had to go to a special place to call us, because all the lines were disconnected.'
Challenge 8: Unreliable post: People did not know whether or not their letters would arrive.	'A man in our community travels a lot. When he's coming you will see him with heaps of letters, when he's going, heaps of letters.' 'I didn't write letters because the post was bad: the letter might go or not go.'
Challenge 9: Internet 'access': In some places internet cafes are too expensive to use. Some people could only access emails through work. Not many other people use email.	'I can't send emails to those people; they can't read it. They don't know how to use computers...'
Challenge 10: When technology fails: Sometimes refugees cannot access any technology.	Messengers were used to pass on news and hand-deliver letters to them. Sometimes they are paid. Sometimes going to visit family and friends is the only way to communicate.

Participants also identified two additional challenges at the workshop: using communication technology to arrange monetary transfers and being at the mercy of the black market.

Monetary transfers

Refugees and other displaced persons need to securely receive money transfers from family and friends. Whilst the Internet is a reliable way to send money from account to account, this is too expensive for people in Africa. Therefore, this normally has to be done through a third party such as a broker, the Western Union or a bank in town. These organisations charge a fee for their service. One of the workshop participants recounted a situation during the war in which official 'organisational' infrastructures had collapsed and all communication with their family and money transfers had to be done through a Somali broker who owned a satellite phone.

There is no direct way of transferring money to the recipients in refugee camps. If transferring money to a family member or friend in a refugee camp, there is a need to phone them to let them know it can be collected. Collection can involve a trip to town or finding someone who can pick up the money from the capital city. Inefficiencies in money transfers between financial organisations can result in the trip to town being unfruitful, with the displaced person returning to a disappointed and desperate family.

The black market

Displaced people are at the mercy of those who can afford to own communication technology and who control access to it. The expense of using communication technology can markedly increase when the owners of mobile phones in refugee camps become corrupt or phone booths in town are controlled by the black market.

Proposed solutions

The *Technology's Refuge* report made a series of recommendations in relation to communication technology use in detention, refugee camp and other displacement settings. The suggestions proposed for refugee camps were then 'tested' at the workshop with refugee community members, representatives from NGOs, aid organisations and settlement service providers.

The findings from the interviews and surveys conducted for *Technology's Refuge* suggested that policies that restrict the ability of detainees to contact families may be unnecessarily punitive. Technology access policies within detention need to ensure detainees have a sufficient range of communication options as well as resources for adequate communication with family overseas and access to legal advice. A huge variety of cheap phone cards for calling overseas are available and could be provided to detainees. Mobile phones have provided a crucial solution to these obstacles and detainees' access to them should be protected in the long-term in the absence of sufficient access to other communication technologies.

Having to work for communication privileges was described in interviews as onerous by participants. While accounts of work for pay provided in this study refer to procedures that were in place several years ago, they raise the issue of equitable and just systems of renumeration within detention centres. A comparison of the detention centre system of work for pay with that employed in the prison systems in Australia may provide a helpful benchmark.

Vastly different experiences of accessing communication technologies in detention were described by the two participants who had been accommodated in Residential Housing Projects (RHPs) and the participant who spent time in community detention. This is particularly of concern if communication rights granted to detainees in an IDC are denied to those in residential housing. Further comparison is warranted of technology access across different detention contexts with that in Australian prisons.

Distrust of detention centre staff resulted in some detainees declining to use communication technologies available to them. Some participants chose not to talk on the phone or send a letter because they feared surveillance by detention centre staff. The absence of transparent rules or their inconsistent application is likely to instill or reinforce fear about getting urgent communication needs met. Clear information about technology rights and the application of fair and consistent access would reduce this fear.

At the workshop, a brainstorm of initiatives or actions that could be undertaken in refugee camps and other types of displacement settings generated the following project ideas. The feasibility and merits of each idea could not be fully assessed during the workshop. Therefore, these project ideas are presented for further analysis and development.

Centralised communication system

Workshop participants proposed that a centralised communications system be established within camps with one professional and accountable service provider. In certain locations this would necessitate the building of infrastructure. In addition, a communication room could also be set up to provide displaced people with access to phones. Additionally, an Internet café could be set up which could provide access to email and internet/VoIP. Training would need to be delivered to residents in the camp so that they were able to use available technologies, such as computers. Participants suggested that priority use be given to linking displaced people with their family members, especially if the whereabouts of immediate family were not known. A user-fee could be levied to cover the operation costs. However, this would necessitate non-government organisations (NGOs) providing a means by which residents in the camp could earn an income, for example, by offering skills training and the opportunity to engage in trades, or microloans that enable displaced people to establish small businesses in camps.

Participants argued that a central communications system would help protect vulnerable people from being preyed on by the black market and discourage the proliferation of corrupt communication businesses. It would also enable better management and policing of legitimate small communications businesses within the camp. If a single telecommunications service provider were introduced, it would give

NGOs the legitimacy to institute rules that govern the use of all telecommunication services within the camp. Some participants also expressed a view that it would be unjust to eliminate corrupt businesses without first providing an alternative means of communication for desperate people in need of family contact. A centralised communication system would be less costly than other alternatives and could eliminate the need for refugees to travel into town to meet their communication needs.

This, however, would not be without the danger of misuse. A central communications room could make it easier for spies from former governments or enemy groups to track down individuals who reside in the camp. If political information or conversations were transmitted on a central communications link, it could place the humanitarian organisation in a bad light. Security is a primary concern in refugee camps and communication systems are not exempt.

Participants recommended that a governance structure for communications be put in place to protect it against misuse, and to uphold the principles of impartiality and neutrality. For example, rules which specify that the communications room be used only for personal communication could be introduced. Refugees who use the communication system would need to be cautioned that political information should not be transmitted.

Participants proposed that a pilot model for a communication room, which is scalable so that it can be rolled out to other refugee camps, be trialled and evaluated. A pilot project would demonstrate proof of concept, and provide a platform on which to lobby for communication capabilities to be introduced into other refugee camps. Its evaluation could provide tangible evidence to support funding applications for similar projects. Participants recommended that such a pilot project be conducted under the auspices of an organisation specifically set up to provide technology aid for refugee camps, by administering communication technology projects. This would establish an organisational infrastructure through which similar projects could be initiated once the pilot study is complete.

Micro-finance loans for small communications businesses

Micro-finance loans could be provided to individual refugees or households in refugee camps to help them establish a small communication business, for example, by renting out mobile phones or satellite radios. This would improve access to telephone services within refugee camps, particularly where there is no other communication service.

Satellite radios

Satellite radios could be provided in refugee camps where there is no mobile telephone network coverage. The provision of UHF/VHF radio communication facilities to refugees in the camp could potentially facilitate communication between friends and relatives in internally displaced people's (IDP) camps because the UHF/VHF radio has wide network coverage. A system could be set up where a simple message is delivered to a similar communication facility in another IDP camp and the

message delivered to the relative and friend. Participants also suggested that radio messages could be used to locate missing persons.

Purchasing airtime

Participants proposed that a project be established through which airtime on mobile phones could be purchased from anywhere in the world for refugees in Africa. They noted that the establishment of relationships between community groups in refugee camps and groups in Australia and the United States may enable such a project to occur. Further subsidies also could be achieved by negotiating cheaper deals with telecommunications providers for technology aid.

Letter delivery

One small group of participants suggested that the drivers of vehicles who regularly drop food off to camps could deliver letters or money transfers. Security concerns were not discussed. This type of arrangement may be particularly beneficial for improving access to communication technologies in camps where there are no telecommunications links between the camp and the outside world. The direct delivery of letters to refugee camps would also be facilitated through the provision of post office boxes.

Support for family reunion

Comments were made that NGO coordination is vital for maximising the effectiveness of systems which have been set up to find missing persons. Competition between NGOs could potentially stifle the coordination required to identify missing persons and send messages to them.

Advocacy and education

Workshop participants recommended that the communication needs of displaced peoples be acknowledged as a central requirement, alongside the provision of food, water and shelter. They noted that humanitarian organisations do not adequately address the needs that displaced people experience as a result of being separated from their family. As one workshop participant expressed it, these are their 'most meaningful' needs.

Sustained advocacy is needed for the provision of communication centres to become a standardised feature in humanitarian assistance. Participants suggested that advocates consider whether they should lobby for communication needs to be incorporated into the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response Standards (SPHERE standards).

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