Northumbria Research Link

The digital routes of human smuggling? Evidence from the UK

Abstract

There are justified concerns but little empirical evidence about the implications of the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in the business of human smuggling. The knowledge base on the use of ICT in human smuggling has rarely gone beyond the rather generic observation that the Internet and mobile technologies are available to and are used by both smugglers and migrants, and there is a concrete knowledge gap regarding the extent and the mode in which the use of ICT is integrated in the process of smuggling. In this paper, which is part of a wider research effort concerned with the role of the Internet in human smuggling in the European Union, we interrogate the outlook and implications of the use of contemporary mobile technology and of social media in the organisation and conduct of human smuggling to the United Kingdom (UK).

Keywords: human smuggling, migration, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), United Kingdom, organised crime

Introduction: situating ICT in human smuggling

The Internet, social media, smart phones and a myriad of digital communications applications have created a world of unprecedented connectivity and have radically changed the ways people communicate, acquire information and organise their activity in everyday life. There is also a dark side to the Internet and the use of information and communication technologies (ICT), as there has been a shift towards crimes that are facilitated or enabled through ICT (e.g. online fraud, stalking and harassment, online grooming, various cyber-manifestations of 'organised crime' and terrorism, etc.) (see Antonopoulos et al., 2018; Freiburger and Crane, 2011; Lavorgna, 2014; Wall, 2007; Whittle et al., 2013). Increasingly, the threat arising from the use of ICT by criminals to either expand opportunity for conventional crimes or to engage in novel ones, features highly in policy and law enforcement (see, e.g., Europol, 2017a; Europol, 2017b; NCA, 2017). Equally, the scholarly investigation of these criminal forms has now become regularised and the knowledge base around them has been expanding (see, e.g., Jewkes and Yar, 2010).

There are justified concerns but little empirical evidence about the implications of the use of ICT in human smuggling, a form of 'organised crime' that the public are strongly against despite their concerns about the well-being of irregular migrants. With regard to the facilitation of irregular migration, the use of ICT has more often than not appeared as a secondary consideration. Human smuggling as a business capitalises on the wider 'push' and 'pull' factors driving the clandestine cross-border flows of people. The established account of human

smuggling holds that as individuals and families take recourse to the services of smugglers in order to evade migration and border controls as they flee conflict zones, economic deprivation and poor life chances, they are exposed to grave and diverse types of harm and conditions of vulnerability, becoming prey to greedy, violent and highly organised smugglers (Shelley, 2014). The narrative is further reinforced by law enforcement assessments of the multifaceted criminal threat smuggling networks pose, and of the prevalence of their activity: a recent joint Europol-Interpol report stated that the migration of more than 90% of those coming to the EU is facilitated, mostly by members of a criminal network. These agencies also expected their numbers to increase in the future in response to the control measures taken by countries along the migratory routes (Europol and Interpol, 2016). In light of this account, ICT appears as a sophisticated tool that adds to the versatility and reach of the smuggling business. Smugglers use the Internet, social media and also widely popular software applications to recruit customers, to arrange facilitation services, including transportation, accommodation and the provision of fraudulent travel documents, and also to make and receive payments. Conversely, the use of ICT by migrants may not only heighten the risk that they are exposed to the deceptive and predatory activity of the smugglers, but also that other users inadvertently become facilitators of the latter's business (Europol, 2017a; NCA, 2017).

Much of the attention clandestine migration receives is underpinned by an acute awareness of the exposure to harm and conditions of vulnerability migrants may face *en route* to their destinations. The recent explosion of irregular migration flows from Asia and Africa to Europe (IOM, no date, a) has exacerbated these concerns: for example, in 2016 alone over 5,100 people died or went missing *en route* in the Mediterranean (IOM, no date, b). There is no lack of accounts linking grave abuses and the deaths of migrants to the callous business methods of smugglers (e.g., Tinti and Reitano, 2017), and the hecatomb in the Mediterranean has gained media coverage precisely from this angle (e.g. Clarke-Billings, 2017). The widespread use of ICT is a cause for concern not only because it facilitates the use of the services of smugglers in order to evade migration and border controls, but also because it may facilitate the decision to use those services. As McAuliffe (2016) argues, the availability of ICT and the unprecedented levels of connectivity deserve focus as an important enabling factor in the irregular migration process as it may actively shape the ways in which people think and act about migration.

The research presented and discussed in this paper addresses the question of the use of ICT in the migrant smuggling business. More specifically, we interrogate the outlook and implications of the use of contemporary mobile technology and of social media in the organisation and conduct of human smuggling to the UK. The findings presented here emerged from a wider research effort concerned with the role of the Internet in human smuggling and human trafficking with the aim to address the existing knowledge gap in a European context (see Di Nicola et al., 2017). Our specific focus on human smuggling has been dictated by the realisation that a considerable disparity exists between the evidence base regarding the role and implications of ICT in human trafficking and the available evidence and knowledge concerning human smuggling. It is often the case that these two types of crime are addressed simultaneously and in combination by research (Laczko and Thompson, 2000; UNODC, 2010;

Aronowitz, 2001). It is also true that there exists a possibility for overlap between the two, considering that the facilitation of irregular migration as defined by the second protocol of the Palermo convention may be transposed into slavery-like exploitation, as described in the first protocol of the same convention (United Nations, 2004), as part of the same process depending on the organisation of the criminal business. The two, however, should not be confused as the different goals and processes of each activity can be neatly distinguished, certainly in theory, but also, typically, in actuality (Salt and Hogarth, 2000). Due to the ascendancy of human trafficking as an issue, more is known about the role and use of ICT in the human trafficking business, particularly sex trafficking, and in this context, the literature appears to grow at a more certain pace (Di Nicola, Cauduro and Falletta, 2013; Latonero, Berhane, Hernandez, Mohebi and Movius, 2011; Latonero et al., 2012; Sykiotou, 2007; Myria, 2017; Sarkar, 2015). Conversely, the knowledge base on the use of ICT in human smuggling has rarely gone beyond the rather generic observation that the Internet and mobile technologies are available to and are used by both smugglers and migrants. Evidence about the use of mobile and information technologies by migrants in the process of migration does exist (Dekker and Engbersen, 2012; Fortunati, Pertierra and Vincent, 2013; Newell, Gomez and Guajardo, 2016; Zijstra and van Liemt, 2017), however, there is a concrete knowledge gap regarding the extent and the mode in which the use of ICT is integrated in the process of smuggling.

The latter gap has two important dimensions. The first one relates to the way human smuggling is represented as an activity and its implications may be significant insofar as the use of ICT may appear unequivocally as an additional tool in the highly organised, sophisticated and ruthless operation of the business of smuggling. An emerging criticism of the established account of human smuggling is that it has tended to obscure important characteristics of the social organisation of the activity and the complex dynamic of the relation and interaction between migrants and smugglers (Achilli, 2015; Sanchez, 2016). Within this complex dynamic, the migrants' position cannot be tenably construed as passive and lacking agency, despite the fact that they can be, and often are exposed to serious abuse and harm. Rather, migrant smuggling is a relation that exists and unfolds in a market environment, and the smuggling transaction requires mutual information seeking and at least a modicum of negotiation and trust-building before it can take place. As Zhang, Sanchez and Achilli (2018: 8) remark, the "binary predator-victim perspective rarely applies in a context where both migrants and smugglers actively engage in negotiating, vetting and trading".

The second dimension regards how the use of ICT is integrated in the business model of smuggling, and more specifically how its use influences the discrete phases of the smuggling process, namely recruitment and transportation. Our main concern has been to assess the extent to which smugglers rely on ICT to organise and conduct their business, and also the kind of mobile technologies they rely on. A number of characteristics of smugglers as they emerge from the research literature are likely to be of significance in this respect. For example, smugglers tend to share national and cultural backgrounds with their clients and they tend to capitalise on familial or friendship ties; they also tend to be members of relatively marginalised, working class, low income communities; smuggling requires no special or

technical skills, but rather social connections and resourcefulness (for an overview, see Sanchez, 2017). These characteristics may pose limits to both the availability and the actual usefulness of ICT resources to the conduct of the smuggling business—or to put it in different terms, the nature of the business may not require the extensive and intensive use of sophisticated ICT resources and methods that corporate service providers use.

As regards the UK context, human smuggling remains an issue attracting considerable attention. Migration facilitated by human smugglers falls under the general category of "(illegal) immigration", which has consistently occupied a dominating position political agendas and appears to weigh heavily on the minds of the British electorate (see, e.g., Swales, 2016; Wilson and Kirk, 2018). Accordingly, law enforcement activity against human smuggling typically receives ample attention in the media (Gentleman, 2018; Barnes, 2018). The UK remains an important destination country as it retains a strong "pull" appeal, particularly for prospective migrants who have connections with established migrant communities in the UK and are faced with economic hardship and political turbulence in their home countries in Asia or Africa. The UK's National Crime Agency (NCA) firmly associates human smuggling with organised crime, as "organised immigration crime" involving criminal groups facilitating the journey to the UK at all stages of the process. Key locations for the smuggling business are Dover and also other ports with direct links to continental ports, which serve as intermediate hubs towards entry to the UK. The smuggling and other illicit businesses associated with it, such as the production of false travel documents appear to be well developed in the UK, and the authorities expect this business to grow, particularly in light of the tighter border controls implemented around Europe (NCA, 2017). Consequently, investigating the use and impact of ICT is highly topical, and our research addresses a key knowledge gap in this respect.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. In the next section we proceed to explain in detail the methodology of our research. We have relied on one hand on a virtual ethnography component aiming to investigate the online context of human smuggling, and on the other we have conducted a series of ('offline') in-depth interviews with strategic informers, including individuals with experience in facilitating clandestine migration to the UK. Our findings session is organised according to the discrete phases of smuggling, recruitment and transportation. The concluding section includes a substantive discussion of our findings relating them to the extant knowledge base around the organisation of the human smuggling business.

Methods

The collection of primary data for this research has involved a mixed methods approach, involving methods suitable for the investigation of the role of the Internet and digital technologies in the business of human smuggling in the UK. This approach was also mandated by the exploratory nature of our work, given the absence of prior research on this particular topic.

The first component of our approach has been a UK-based virtual ethnography to acquire primary data, conducted between November 2015 and February 2017. As a research method, virtual ethnography extends the ethnographic field and situated observation from the examination of face-to-face researcher-informant interactions (Lenihan and Kelly-Holmes, 2016) and "transfers the ethnographic tradition of the researcher as an embodied research instrument to the social spaces of the internet" (Hine, 2008: 257). In this regard, the virtual ethnographer immerses themselves in a virtual environment, observing and interacting using media relevant to that site for an extended period of time (Turney, 2008).

As a starting point to initiate the virtual ethnography, online searches were conducted on Google to ascertain any popular websites and online classifieds advertising migration facilitation services. We used several keywords, such as "trips", "smuggling to Europe", "smuggling services", "migrate to Europe", "boat trips", "yacht excursions", "travel to Europe" "travelling to the UK", "visa services" "Schengen visa" and "tours", which we translated into Arabic and performed searches, on Google and other search engines. In addition, we also utilised social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, and used the search function on social networking sites, such as Facebook, to discover relevant pages, groups and people.

The exploration of the smuggling business online requires researchers to take a more active role, and our approach has been to create e-mail accounts and profiles on social networking sites as well as web-forums. This operated as means to get access and study the activity on these sites. Our Facebook account allowed us to observe pages, groups and people that were advertising smuggling services, such as ways and means of transportation and aiding one's entry into another country. We also attempted to engage in conversation with popular smuggling pages, and this more active participation yielded relevant data, which we shall highlight in the findings section. As part of this process, we obtained screenshots of images and text from websites, online classifieds, forums and social networking sites, and this content was subsequently analysed. Part of our virtual ethnography was also conducted on the 'Deep Web'. In the cybercrime literature and policy, the latter has become an important concern (see, for example, Chertoff, 2017).

It is worth commenting further on some important methodological question of our virtual ethnography component, given our reliance on the data collected by means of this method. Some researchers have raised doubts about whether online efforts can yield empirical data that are trustworthy and representative, and have cited issues regarding authenticity, validity, reliability and online research methods (Davey et al, 2012; Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016). In particular, these concerns regard the assessment of the quality of information that has been acquired from web forums, given that they are communicative, unregulated, user-created and active social arenas; thus, the data collected may be inaccurate, and whether intentionally or not, misleading (Davey et al, 2012). Hall and Antonopoulos (2016) nevertheless highlight that data collected from online web forums and social media sites can produce rich empirical evidence from groups and communities that are normally hard to reach and can provide substantial insights into the 'everyday life' of these individuals and social groups. While some

information may be misleading or false, a general disregard of its quality is unwarranted, given that offline methods can suffer from similar issues. Additionally, there are good reasons not to dismiss cursorily the quality of the information posted on social media or online fora, given the seriousness of the information-seeking and the decisions it is intended to inform. Migrants choosing to enter the clandestine migration route have nothing to gain from sharing or exchanging inaccurate or specious information.

The second key component of our research design has involved a more conventional, 'offline', approach. We conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with a variety of key actors in the UK, including non-governmental organisation representatives (NGOs) (n=3), law enforcement agents (LEAs) (n=9), experts on cyber-crime and/or human smuggling (and human trafficking) (n=4), and human smugglers (n=2). The two human smugglers were identified from a previous research study that one of the authors conducted on another manifestation of 'organised crime' (see Antonopoulos, 2008; Antonopoulos and Hall, 2016). In essence, snowball sampling was used with our initial participants introducing us to other (potential then) participants. One of the biggest advantages of this method of sampling is the 'informal' way of identification of participants from hard-to-reach populations such as illegal entrepreneurs (Atkinson and Flint, 2004; Antonopoulos and Papanicolaou, 2014).

The interviews were conducted either face-to-face, by telephone or through Skype, with our participants' responses being recorded with a digital voice-recorder. To ensure ethical compliance, we created informed consent forms that outlined the nature of the research project, and also the rights of the participants, as required by the ethics code of the British Society of Criminology. These forms were presented to the participants prior to the outset of the interview to sign, and once consent was obtained, we immediately commenced with the interviews. We used an interview guide as the basis for our questions, which was conditional to the particular participant we were interviewing. During the interview process however, these interview guides were not followed slavishly.

With regards to the research conducted online, in most cases acquiring informed consent was attempted but unattainable due to the inconstant nature of the web (see also Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016). Moreover, although non-participant observation would be seen by some as unethical, this process was undertaken in publicly available sites. Within this context, certain systematic practices were put in place to offer a certain amount of privacy to users in our virtual ethnography. Following Davey et al.'s (2012) research into online drug fora, the practical ways in which this research endeavoured to protect online populations were by concealing the usernames of contributors to the sites included in the research. Throughout the study, as a way of maintaining the ethical values of social research, data from the virtual environment do not appear alongside the user name, and fora names are not disclosed. Ethical approval for both the online and 'offline' contexts of the research was granted by the principal investigator's university research ethics committee.

Findings: ICT and the smuggling phases

Recruitment

The overwhelming majority of our data relating to the role of digital technologies and the Internet in the facilitation of human smuggling to the UK were captured from social networking websites, particularly Facebook. We found that social networking sites are a key instrument for migrants and smugglers to share information about travelling routes, the occurrence of border closures, transportation services and involved costs of arranging trips. We identified numerous active and highly popular smuggling-related accounts and group pages on Facebook. Particularly, group pages can facilitate variable levels of access to information shared by members of the group depending on their privacy settings—for example, a group page can be open to all Facebook users to join, and conversely, closed group pages require an administrator's approval of the one's request to join.

According to one interviewed expert, communication and the broadcasting of important information, such as which countries are easy to enter, where borders are open to travel through and where they have been closed, may influence heavily the decision-making processes of migrants and consequently the recruitment phase of smuggling:

> It [the Internet] would be spreading news, if it's easy to get through the process of an asylum application, the news spreads very quickly, for example 'it's more relaxed in this country or the other country', then people will plan destinations accordingly. Again, it's communication, it's how you spread the news (Interview with Expert 2).

Indeed, Facebook pages advertised transportation services, the sale of counterfeit travel documents such as passports, visas and identification papers including driving licenses, as well as general discussions of the navigation of paths into the UK, as well as in wider Europe. Individual users may also share their personal experiences: for example, we came across an individual's account and photos of brutal attacks by border guards and guard dogs on migrants travelling via a land route attempting to cross through the Bulgarian border. On another site we came across Turkey-based smugglers, who advertised transportation services to Europe by highlighting danger and urging potential clients to connect via the Viber app (a Voice over IP and messaging application for smart phones).

We gained access to group pages by joining them or following them and we also accessed the information on the pages of some accounts (that were obviously not personal in the strict sense) by adding them as "friends". Thus we were able to receive notifications of new postings and updates relating to transportation journeys, the advertisement of new trips, usually dependent on suitable weather conditions, and the sale of passports or other such counterfeit documents. As these pages feature content relating to illicit activity, we observed that the names were changed constantly, possibly as a means of avoiding detection. Other accounts were closed after a short life span. Just like the redirection of potential recruits to VoIP applications, the creation and termination of social media accounts on a regular basis appears to be a precaution against detection. As one of the smugglers we interviewed remarked:

> I closed them [Smuggling pages on Facebook] all. There are not there anymore. There

is no point in having them. I had many because I used each page for a little bit and then I opened another one and so one. For protection, you know. You don't want to be stable in this business, you need to 'move' again and again for protection (Interview with Smuggler 2).

Our interviews with human smugglers indicated that the Internet was an important tool in their smuggling activities, in particular the recruitment phase to advertise their services. Nevertheless, there is significant variation in the extent to which the medium is used:

Yes, I have used the internet many, many times! Internet along with mobile phones, of course, is the best to have business from a distance! I have been helping people to come to the UK since 2002. I enjoy being a kacakçi [human smuggler]. […] I used Facebook before I come to England for a year, a year and a half. I had many pages in face book and advertised my services. Transportation, travel to Europe, good prices, best service (Interview with Smuggler 2).

Yes [using the Internet] but not as much as you may think. Most of my business in the beginning [recruitment] happens by people [offline]. People know you, they know what you do, they know you are a kacakçi [smuggler], and they come to you and tell you what they want. … I don't trust the internet so much anyway because you never know who might be watching … My business partner in Kurdistan will send messages to friends, e-mails and ask "do you know anyone who wants to go to Europe? If you do, tell them to send me a message at so and so…" (Interview with Smuggler 1).

It is important to mention that Smuggler 1 emphasised that often, recruitment took place offline, as people who knew them either directly or indirectly, through friends or relatives, and their occupation as a smuggler would initiate contact in person and make enquiries on how to travel to the UK for themselves or for their relatives. According to Sanchez (2017), those seeking to migrate explore potential options usually by consulting friends and relatives who have made and undertaken successful smuggling journeys, often meeting with smugglers in person or chatting via telephone and may meet several smugglers until a suitable option is chosen. Moreover, a small number of smugglers manage to form a client base and positive reputation attesting to the reliability, degree of communication throughout the journey and the quality of the transportation, all of which contribute to the duration of a smuggling enterprise, enabling smugglers to generate and conduct business with prospective customers.

A consistent and important finding pertaining to the recruitment phase of human smuggling was that some pages, particularly the ones that were more active and popular, would expose fraudulent smugglers, who were advertising deceptive transportation services. These posts would often be very lengthy, detailing the unscrupulous smuggler's name, nationality, the country and city they were operating in, and how they had defrauded their victim or victims, particularly in regards to payment. For example, a popular and active smuggling page on Facebook entitled "Uncle Aziz" exposed fraudulent smugglers deceptively claiming to offer

transportation services to Europe and the UK, by exhibiting screenshots of Viber chats, in which travel arrangements were discussed. In many cases, a photograph of the denounced person was also attached to the post. Additionally, some people would then comment on the post, to confirm that they too had been deceived by the smuggler, and would strongly urge others to be aware and use caution. On the basis of the popularity of these pages that would routinely uncover deceptive smugglers, it would not be unreasonable to think that they function as a potentially very effective form of benevolent recruitment, by way of demonstrating a concern about the safety of the potential migrants of raising awareness about dangerous swindlers masquerading as smugglers. By instilling confidence in their own services, the owners of these Facebook accounts would thus encourage migrants to arrange transportation through these pages instead.

Transportation

We found a large number of Facebook pages that were actively advertising transportation services, including boat, yacht or flight trips and to a lesser extent, land routes, where the journey would be made on foot to various countries in Europe. One popular travel route was from Turkey, particularly from the cities of Izmir and Mersin to various islands in Greece, and then utilising various routes to and within an assortment of European countries to the destination of the UK. For example, we came across a Facebook page called "Smuggled to Europe", advertising transportation services, and including a screenshot captured from Google Maps that demonstrated a transit route from Turkey to the destination of the UK. One of our interviewed smugglers mentioned that a relative of theirs would advertise the sale of European passports to facilitate transportation and entry to the UK:

> My cousin is in France and in his Facebook account has a post about European passports. With one of those you get to England with no problem. You just need the money, 800-1000 euros is OK. [On being showed the particular Facebook account, including the advert/post translated from Arabic to English] "Want to buy passport, ID, visa and driving license with no hassle? We make really high quality documents for travel to European countries. We sell only best documents. Guaranteed success. We make perfect passports for UK, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, USA, Canada. Very competitive prices. Discount available for families. The passport can be ready in 5 days. For more information, send an e-mail: jXXXX@gmail.com / tel. 0033 2 99xxxxxx" (Interview with Smuggler 2).

Typically, these pages include photographs of the particular means of transport, usually of boats, cruise liners and yachts, complete with information on their size and dimensions, as well as stating the duration of the journey. In addition, these posts also outline the prices charged for the routes and journey, and include a contact number to make further enquiries. Moreover, many of these pages extensively posted photographs and videos of "successful" trips made, both during the journey, and after the destination had been reached. This is unambiguously a

marketing technique aiming to encourage potential customers and boost their confidence in the service provided.

Forms of 'customer feedback' also typically appear on these pages. For example, many pages featured a box (webpage frame) that attested to how quickly the persons behind these pages would reply to messages. Some of the pages were marked as "very responsive", meaning their owners would reply within an hour, and others as "extremely responsive", indicating that the response to messages would be returned in minutes. Some pages also post status updates of successful journeys made, and alert potential migrants of adverse weather conditions. New routes into Europe are also advertised using screenshots of Google Maps indicating distance as well as providing information on how to travel through the route without being discovered by border guards or officials.

An interesting observation that we were able to make on numerous occasions regards the interplay between various forms of technology, namely between the Internet and mobile phone applications. We have already mentioned Viber, and the alternative WhatsApp application is also widely used. When smugglers use social media and these applications in combination, Facebook operates as a gateway. The purpose of the Facebook page is to introduce potential migrants/customers to services through advertisements, while further communications, most likely to arrange transportation journeys and discuss payment are diverted to WhatsApp and Viber, usually through the telephone numbers that are listed in the post. This was the usual method reported by our interviewed smugglers: initial questions are answered through private chats in Facebook, but are then continued on mobile phone, so that further arrangements can be made between the smugglers and the clients, or between smugglers working alongside other smugglers:

> This [private chats in Facebook] was very rare after they contacted me. Most of clients gave me a call; I offered a telephone number in the post, so they called me and made all arrangements. There are a few of, usually very young, people who will send messages in private chat in Facebook. Young boys who are online the whole time and are interested in going to Europe and they may want to ask something before the arrangements are made. You know to ask whether they can come with less money. Maybe because they don't have a phone, I don't know. Most of the people called me and I answer any questions they have (Interview with Smuggler 2).

> I just use mobile phones to communicate with my partners in places like Istanbul and Izmir. This is how we take care of business. Once the people get to Greece, there are others who take care of them. I also talk to people I know about the travel and advise them what to do when in Istanbul because Istanbul is very big and people from my town find it difficult. (Interview with Smuggler 1).

Primarily when it comes to the smuggling of Asian and African migrants, all smuggling groups and/or individuals 'cooperate' (without even considering it), in an attempt to bring the bulk of migrants from Asia and Africa to the United Kingdom (as well as other countries of Western

Europe). This takes place via a smuggler-to-smuggler approach that does not allow irregular migrants to be lost (see Içduygu and Toktas, 2002). Smugglers often unwittingly 'collaborate' with other smugglers while not known to one another, as they may live and operate in different villages, cities, regions, and countries (see, for example, Sanchez, 2017). In the event of arrest of one of the smugglers, or if the chain is sometimes broken during the journey (e.g., due to policing operations), other individuals, groups and networks that have no connection with the smugglers of the initial stage, take over in the smuggling of migrants. Information and communication technologies are instrumental at this part. Smugglers and their clients appear to have a preference for basic mobile phones for communication purposes, alongside social media and to recruit and guide clients. As Sanchez (2017) points out, this usage is better understood as a reflection of the affordability and availability of mobile technology, rather than as a marker of the technological sophistication of smugglers. Significant sections of the communications that place between various smugglers working together take place through mobile technology, including phone calls, text messages (SMS), as well as WhatsApp and Viber and social media websites. These undertakings, when executed successfully in coordination, will guide clients to their final destination.

As a means of a more active engagement with this aspect of the virtual ethnography, we tried to contact some of the more popular smuggling Facebook pages, in particular those who were likely to respond swiftly to messages. Our aim was to find out whether there were particular pages or smugglers and 'brokers' that would be able to provide information on ways of transportation and routes taken to travel, specifically to the United Kingdom. We contacted these pages with a simple inquiry of how it would be possible to travel to the United Kingdom, from Syria as well as the costs involved as a lone traveller for the journey. As a means of initiating conversation, we used an online translation tool to translate text to Arabic, and then proceeded to send messages to the pages via Facebook's web (and desktop)-based Messenger feature. Whilst some of these pages did indeed provide swift responses, the majority of the time we were informed that further information could only be discussed through mobile phone applications such as WhatsApp and Viber, with contact numbers provided to do so. However, given that these conversations would be conducted entirely in Arabic, it was impracticable to pursue this line of investigation within the framework of our research. Nevertheless, creating and setting up a Facebook account yielded a voluminous set of data, as we were able to gain more access and insight into previously inaccessible content, such as relevant smuggling groups and pages.

The smugglers that we interviewed also remarked on the use of the Internet, in particular social media and mobile phones as being key mechanisms in the logistics of the transportation process, specifically keeping in contact with the clients during the transportation journey, as well as the arrival of their clients to the destination and, importantly, the arrangement of payment. Irregular migrants (or their families that very often see the facilitation of their migration as an investment) pay the full or at least 50% of the total smuggling fee in advance. This 50% is in most occasions used towards paying important actors of the journey before the actual journey starts. The rest of the fee is paid upon the migrants' arrival in the destination

country. Often, advance payments are made to a middleman, such as a trusted and prominent member of the local community, who then forwards the payment to the organiser once the migrant's facilitated journey has been completed:

> Once we have a customer, I have used Facebook and I have also been using e-mail in order to take care of details with regards to the details of the trip from Kurdistan to Istanbul and from Istanbul to Izmir, from Izmir into the Greek islands. Sometimes, especially when I know the person I helped to travel e-mails and Facebook are used to let me know that they have reached the destination and to sort out any outstanding money issues. We have to get paid too! You know, where to go and who to pay and so on. Sometimes there are problems any people are getting lost, they cannot find a place to stay, they cannot find someone to talk to, etc. etc. etc. the travel is full of problems and you cannot do this without e-mails, and phones (Interview with Smuggler 2).

Additionally, one of our interviewed smugglers would also provide information on available accommodation, and where to charge phones during journeys when the duration of the trip to the destination country was uncertain:

> In most of the places people have to stay [transit points], they need a house, a bed to sleep on. The best way for them to know what is there, cheap places to stay, is Facebook. You can find a hotel anywhere in Europe but the problem is that they are very expensive. When they travel for months or even years they want to spend as little money as possible. You never know how long the trip will last, and in some place they ask them for a lot of money, 5 euros for a bottle of water, 10 euros for a sandwich, and some people Greece, in Italy, in France, they ask you 20 euros to let you recharge your mobile battery. So in the internet, in Facebook, you can advertise accommodation for as little as 10 euros a night. When people travel, they are always on their mobiles to find the cheapest solutions to their everyday problems… my cousin does the same for cheap rooms. [On being showed a relevant post on Facebook on available accommodation in France] "Cheap rooms in Calais. 15 euros per night, TV included. Common toilet with shower. Clean. Available for families. Discount negotiable. For more information, tel. 0033 2 99xxxxxx"] (Interview with Smuggler 2).

ICT in human smuggling: not a technological revolution in crime

The purpose of our study has been to address an important knowledge gap with regard to the use of ICT in the business of human smuggling to the UK. We have found that mobile and communication technologies have a role in the practice of smugglers, just as they do in the strategies of individuals entering the routes of clandestine migration. Migrants use ICT to seek information about routes and the conditions prevailing in them, as well as information about the services that smugglers make available to facilitate their journey. Equally, smugglers take

advantage of the speed and directness of the medium, whether Internet accessed via smart phones or more conventional mobile telephony in order to advertise their business, reach a larger number of potential customers and possibly gain an advantage over the competition. This general outlook unremarkably mirrors the patterns of merchant and consumer online strategies and behaviour in the licit travel and other services business.

It is important to recognise immediately the limitations of our research with regard to the extent to which virtual ethnography has enabled us to obtain an accurate and rich representation of the reality of smuggler and migrant practices in its entirety. While we have been able to capture the online behaviours and interactions of members of the two groups, and we also have been able to probe the online behaviour of smugglers in terms of how they present themselves online and respond to queries, important demographic information regarding smuggler and migrant backgrounds and the social composition of the population that participates in the online universe of the smuggling business has remained uncertain. In other words, a virtual ethnography of human smuggling can capture the behaviours of those who are in fact able to access the Internet and social media, or even have access to the mobile technologies that mediate that access.

The above limitation of our study already points to the key message emerging from our findings. The question of access to ICT is not inconsequential. Firstly, it should not be readily assumed that access to ICT is ubiquitous in the sending countries, as Internet diffusion continues to be low in the developing countries (World Bank, 2016), and, in addition, those who decide to join the routes of clandestine migration are likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds even in these already digitally disadvantaged countries (Sanchez, 2017). One the other hand, while some smugglers may indeed take a more ambitious approach and attempt to reach out to potential clientele via the Internet and social media, many others may not be able or interested to do so. This may be due to objective limitations regarding the location at which they operate, the lack of ICT infrastructure or equipment, the opportunistic nature of their involvement in the process, and, of course, the very illicit nature of the activity, since the use of ICT increases the possibility of detection by the authorities (see, for example, Moore, 2007). These limitations are also amplified by the fact that, at its core as an activity, human smuggling is not technology-intensive, but rather it is a small scale operation requiring practical skills, knowledge of locations and routes and flexibility in decision making (Andreas, 2000; Carrera and Guild, 2016; Sanchez, 2016; Spener, 2004, 2009; Zhang, 2007).

The upshot of the above observations is that one should take precautions against the temptation to treat ICT and its impact on the business of human smuggling as an unambiguous major development and a new type of criminal threat. The ambivalence towards the use of ICT that our interviewed smugglers expressed in the accounts suggests that they are more likely to take a pragmatic view of technology and its usefulness as a means depending on the context of their business, and less likely to perceive and engage with ICT as a core element of that business. This would suggest that, even though the transformative effect of ICT on contemporary life cannot be understated, the ongoing debates regarding whether it engenders new types of criminal activity or facilitates old ones (see, e.g. McCusker, 2006; Levi, 2001;

Savona and Mignone, 2004) cannot be resolved abstractly. Rather, what is required is an examination of the extent to which ordinary criminal activity is adaptive to technological change:

> "It is important to distinguish new crime from new methods. To take one common case, frequently "computer crime" is singled out as a prime new area of concern. But it really boils down to a series of traditional criminal acts . . . that happen today to be assisted by the use of computers. The crimes remain the same. The only difference is the technique used to commit them, and the ability to do them from much further away than was commonly the case" (Naylor, 2000: 4; see also McQuade 2011; Hall and Antonopoulos, 2015).

Equally, our findings regarding the use of ICT by migrants planning or undertaking the journey, that is, the prospective and actual clientele of smugglers, strongly suggest that the question of vulnerability cannot be resolved abstractly. To state this differently, the migrants' online activity that our research captured confirms the real risks involved in facilitated clandestine migration, but also revealed a dimension that would preclude any abstract conceptualisation of the migrants' position as passive and vulnerable because of the use of ICT. In fact, it seems more plausible to approach ICT (and the emergence of online information seeking and exchange that it allows) as an enabling factor indeed (McAuliffe, 2016), but one that potentially empowers migrants and offers a qualified layer of protection against from the predatory activity of the more opportunistic and unscrupulous smugglers. Of course, the availability and effectiveness of this layer is mediated by the persisting inequalities of online access, and even when these have been explored and taken into account, more research is needed to establish the extent to which ICT modifies qualitatively the conditions under which the smuggling transaction is negotiated and materialised. Nevertheless, the ability to actively vet smugglers, gain information on the kind of services they offer and the conditions of the route appears to be a net positive development. As such, on the basis of our findings we would advise against an aggressive over-policing of the smuggling-related online communities, whether by law enforcement or the providers of the various social media and other online platforms.

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