I hope, one day, I will have the right to speak

Sara Creta
Dublin City University, Ireland

Abstract

Situated at the intersection of digital migration studies, social movement studies and critical citizenship studies, this article explores how people on the move (migrants, refugees) in Libya use digital media to raise rights violations and to challenge European Union (EU) policies and UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) practices. To examine how digital media provide a 'space of appearance' for people on the move in Libya, the study presents a qualitative thematic analysis of 49 posts and 986 comments published on the official Facebook page of UNHCR Libya between January 2018 and January 2019. Major themes include criticisms of UNHCR services and EU policies as well as the raising of human rights issues surrounding detention and evacuation. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how digital media enable people on the move to raise rights claims, contest official narratives and become active narrators of their individual struggles with the system of control and exclusion that is so deeply embedded in the discourse of securitized humanitarian care at Europe's border. At the same time, it highlights how issues of digital access and communicative capacity influence visibility and self-expression in the digital space of appearances.

Introduction

In August 2018, dozens of people on the move (i.e. migrants, refugees) initiated a rare protest in a detention centre outside Tripoli, Libya. Trapped in a country devastated by civil war and at risk of human trafficking, they asked the UN Refugee Agency (UN High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR]) for help. They publicized their protest through Facebook photos and videos, and they articulated their message using UNHCR's vocabulary: 'human rights', 'refugees', 'assistance', 'protection', 'justice'. In a few hours, their posts reached hundreds of thousands of people around the world, including activists who mobilized to ask for their evacuation.

Such protests offer important insights into the possibilities of claiming visibility and raising human rights claims through digital media. The agency exercised by people on the move in Libya also challenges the perception of marginalized people as 'vulnerable'. Within policy and media narratives, communities affected by crisis are often reduced to wounded bodies that require biopolitical management (Nyers and Rygiel, 2012). In this context, this article seeks 'to (re)politicize the border as a contested humanitarian space' (Stavinoha, 2019: 124) in order to recognize the human cost of European Union (EU) migration policies and the agency of people on the move in exposing these conditions and making human rights claims. In so doing, I argue that it is important to assess the role of digital media in order to re-conceive how communities affected by crisis can be supported in decision-making about their own lives.

Theoretically, the article is positioned at the intersection of three fields: digital migration studies, social movement studies and critical citizenship studies. Concepts of agency, connectivity and communication rights are central to recent work examining how migrants and refugees use digital technologies (Coddington and Mountz, 2014; Leurs and Smets, 2018; Rae et al., 2018; Stavinoha, 2019). To build on this work, I propose that the digital practices of people on the move in Libya may be understood as acts of citizenship (Isin and Nielsen, 2008) that necessitate the adoption of a social justice approach to research, including critical legal and human rights perspectives. A social justice approach is 'as crucial as it is troubled and under-studied' (Hodzic and Tolbert, 2017: 298): it can mitigate or obscure the substance of transitional justice efforts to establish what happened, who the victims were and who was responsible for the violations. Although the merits of employing a social justice approach has implications for how communities on the move are studied, a deeper reflection on the nature of collective actions of communities affected by crisis is also needed (Tenove, 2019). In particular, it is important to understand that, while visibility is gained, the disruption of a top-down power dynamic creates a 'mediated space of appearance' (Arendt, 1958) for people on the move to communicate their own story, when they can, in their own words, and using their own technology. For Arendt, it is only through speech and action in the public realm that the reality of the world becomes apparent. For people on the move and those detained at borders, the space of appearance takes on an added significance as an opportunity to be seen and heard in public. In particular, the 'logic of connective action', unofficially created, materializes not only in protests in Libya to reclaim visibility, but also as a dynamic to build alliances, solutions and alternative narratives (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). Despite these considerable mechanisms, people on the move continue to document the conditions of their detention in Libya and their attempts to protest against the effects of the European migration policy. This is a policy of externalization whereby the EU's foreign relations instrument, the European Neighbourhood Policy, is used to support the Libyan coastguard to intercept people at sea and prevent them from reaching EU countries.

This study analyses how the social media platform Facebook has been adopted as a means of self-expression and protest. Specifically, it investigates how the platform facilitates the diffusion of rights claims, demands for visibility and calls for tangible solutions by states and by UNHCR. The starting point for analysis is the official Facebook page of UNHCR in Libya. Through this and related channels, UNHCR advertises its services and interacts with target groups (i.e. refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced and

stateless persons) as well as the local public and donors. As defined in the Facebook profile description, the core mandate of UNHCR is to protect and assist refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced, returnees and stateless persons. Drawing on a period of digital ethnography and a thematic analysis of 49 posts and 986 comments published on the official Facebook page of UNHCR Libya between January 2018 and January 2019, I examine how the Facebook page serves as a 'mediated space of appearance' (Arendt, 1958) that allows people on the move to exercise their political agency by claiming rights and disrupting dominant media and humanitarian discourses.

The study outlines and problematizes how these communicative practices resist and contest the EU's border regime of externalization and create an 'interruption of the UNHCR's monopoly over the language of protection, care, and resettlement' (Moulin and Nyers, 2007). This article suggests that the way that protection is framed by UNHCR and the practical restrictions on the implementation of protection in the context of Libya leave an important space for digital media to become a useful tool to engage with relevant communities. In particular, the findings highlight how people on the move in Libya develop their own strategies for protection, form their own support networks and advocate for international assistance.

Regarding terminology, I use the terms 'people on the move' or 'people trapped in Libya' as a counterpoint to the rigid categories – 'refugee', 'asylum seeker' and 'migrant' – that prevail in legal and policy discourses. These broader descriptive terms aim to expand the terminology that is commonly used when discussing the many complexities inherent in human migration and how migration border control is experienced.

Background: The situation of people on the move in Libya

Considering its strategic location, Libya is a major transit and destination country for people fleeing conflict, extreme poverty and human rights violations.[1] Beset by internal conflicts, Libya is home to a myriad of armed and radical groups. Criminal networks capitalize on this political fragility with human trafficking and smuggling controlled by armed groups, some of which are linked to official security institutions (Micallef, 2017). Although access for journalists is limited, a 2017 CNN report highlighted the operation of migrant 'slave auctions' (Elbagir et al., 2017). Migrant extortion, kidnapping, forced labour and sexual exploitation are all part of Libya's smuggling economy.

Known as 'the backdoor to Europe', Libya also plays the role of gatekeeper for the EU by stopping the flow of people from Africa to Europe (Hamood, 2008). It is a focal point for Europe's externalization policy for migration. Shortly after the CNN report in November 2017, African and European leaders agreed to end detention and human rights abuses in Libya while also committing to reducing migrant flows. However, European leaders primarily measure the success of their migration policy in terms of the number of people crossing the Mediterranean, ignoring the human cost of these policies and the outsourcing of enforcement to Libyan militias (Cuttitta, 2018). Instead, EU–Libya cooperation on migration is reinforced through various programmes financed by the EU with the aim of helping the Libyan coastguard to prevent migration to Europe. Consequently, the number of asylum seekers and refugees living in detention in Libya has almost doubled (UNHCR, 2018).

Those detained are held arbitrarily and indefinitely while subjected to grave human rights abuses including torture, rape and enforced disappearance (Office for the High Commissioner on Human Rights [OHCHR], 2018). By mid-January 2019, 55,936 asylum seekers and refugees were registered with UNHCR in Libya. The number of individuals in detention centres is unclear. UNHCR (2018) identified 3,762 individuals, but the number is probably higher; informal statistics suggest 6,800 were held in detention centres in western Libya in January 2019 as many are held in unofficial detention centres where the UN has no access. Some 6,186 individuals have been evacuated from Libya since UNHCR started its evacuation programme in November 2017 (UNHCR, 2020). In 2018, a UN report acknowledged that the human rights situation of people on the move in Libya is 'desperate and dangerous'. It is against this background that the migrants and refugees began their protest in August 2018. The following sections provide a theoretical context for analysing this protest in terms of digital connectivity and digital acts of citizenship.

Theoretical framework: Digital connectivity, migration and citizenship

The current era of digital connectivity and largescale migration – including the so-called European 'migration crisis' – has contributed to the development of new theoretical concepts and the emergence of a new research field: digital migration studies (for an overview, see Leurs and Smets, 2018). As Leurs and Smets argue, researchers need to establish common ground between various fields of scholarship and, crucially, to foreground commitments toward social change and social justice. Media and communication technologies have historically played a crucial role in the lives of people on the move and the existing literature has mapped the ways in which these communities incorporate digital technologies and the implications on their lives (see Alencar, 2018, 2020; Leurs and Ponzanesi, 2018; Retis and Tsagarousianou, 2019, for an overview). Recent work examines how social media facilitate migration and integration (Alencar, 2018; Erdem, 2018), human trafficking (Zimmerman and Kiss, 2017) and diaspora engagement (Al-Rawi and Fahmy, 2018: 201).

The 'space of flows' (Castells, 2009) enabled by digital technologies helps people on the move to stay in touch with friends and family, and create a sense of community belonging through new forms of immediacy and proximity (Latonero and Kift, 2018; Ponzanesi, 2020). However, media and policy discourses often exhibit techno-orientalism in their characterization of migrants and digital technology. A pressing question is whether digital technologies enable a 'new distribution of power' (Borkert et al., 2009) and the amplification of marginalized voices. Digital technologies enable more people to become active producers and disseminators of political content (Couldry et al., 2018; Segura and Waisbord, 2016; Uldam and Vestergaard, 2015), but 'few studies have focused on the use of social media networks by asylum seekers within detention centres' (Rae et al., 2018: 483). Studies by Coddington and Mountz (2014) and Rae et al. (2018) focused on Australia's offshore detention camps. Rae et al. (2018: 479) found that Facebook enabled 'detained asylum seekers to conduct an unmediated form of self-represented witnessing that exposes human rights abuses and documents justice claims'.

Despite Libya's key role in European policy, little has been published on the digital practices of people on the move in Libya and how they are challenging the regime of securitized humanitarianism at the border.

In this context, I explore how digital media can become a 'space of appearance' (Arendt, 1958: 195) that allows people on the move to reclaim their narrative and to convey their struggles to exist in the European's communicative order (Georgiou, 2018). For Arendt, the space of appearance exists through acts of appropriation whereby people occupy a public space and appear in the fullness of their humanity through speech and action. This space of appearance, in Arendt terms, is constituted through a 'web of narratives' of past, present and future tales, remembrances and stories. It is only through speech and action that a 'space of appearances' is created in which people on the move show who they are – the disclosure of the 'who' through speech and action. It comes with all the tensions, silences and paradoxes, shifting practices of dissent and their uncompromising narratives, to re-establish that 'right to exist' in a climate of unwantedness. Of course, the capacity to occupy this space in the digital landscape is predicated on people's ability not only to access technology, but also on their acquired skills, including language literacy and digital literacy. Such skills are not equally distributed in any society and these inequalities are acute for people on the move.

Nevertheless, in mainstream media, the voice of migrants is largely presented in ways that perpetuate their image of dependency and powerlessness (Kisiara, 2015; Thorbjørnsrud and Ustad Figenschou, 2016). The possibility that digital tools can be used to create a network of resistance that challenges, provokes or overcomes power structures is an important one to understand. Moreover, for researchers, it is important to incorporate theoretical and methodological frameworks that recognize the political nature of voices. On this basis, I suggest that digital practices aimed at gaining media visibility may be recognized as communicative 'acts of citizenship' (Isin and Nielsen, 2008: 200). It is to this concept I now turn.

As the internet crosses borders, identities are shaped in different online spaces. The 'online dynamics of migration flows' (Kok and Rogers, 2017: 6) take shape in these online spaces, which, in some cases, form communities of resistance or counter publics. Efforts to gain voice and visibility through digital media may be understood as acts of citizenship by those who formally lack citizenship; that is, 'those who enact their right to have rights even though not officially entitled to do so' (Maestri and Hughes, 2017: 629). In this view, citizenship is 'a complex phenomenon that stretches beyond legal definitions'. It is a dynamic process of subject formation in which people 'claim rights and impose obligations in emotionally charged tones; pose their claims in enduring and convincing arguments; and look to shift established practices, status and order' (Isin and Nielsen, 2008: 10). Applied to people on the move, this concept allows researchers to recognize the political agency exercised by the communities affected by crisis.

A number of scholars argue that people on the move assert themselves as political subjects and attempt to disrupt sovereign violence through communicative acts of citizenship, such as demanding rights (Nyers, 2008; Puggioni, 2014; Stavinoha, 2019). The detention centres located outside 'Fortress Europe' are spaces of exclusion where the communications lens becomes particularly pertinent for studying the performative dimension of citizenship as a 'social process through which individuals and social groups

engage in claiming, expanding or losing rights' (Isin and Nielsen, 2008: 22). Digital technologies – smartphones, social media – are the means of communication with transnational actors in the outside world, including journalists, advocates, activists, legal representatives and families. In effect, they create media to act as digital witnesses and they rely on transnational networks to amplify the evidence of rights violations and calls for equality. Through communicative acts of citizenship, people on the move contest their condemnation to 'bare life' (Agamben, 2004): that is, a life stripped of rights in which people are reduced to mere biology and are denied the possibility of full and equal participation in social and political life. However, little is known about how people on the move in detention or in Libya are using digital media in this way. To address this gap, I adopt a critical ethical approach to investigate:

RQ1: What topics emerged among Facebook comments?

RQ2: To what extent these communicative practices that carry the potential to interrupt the dominant humanitarian narrative portrayed by UNHCR can be considered 'communicative 'acts of citizenship'?

Method

The analysis is based on the content published on the public Facebook pages of UNHCR Libya between January 2018 and January 2019. It is part of a wider research investigation into the digital activism of people on the move at the EU's borders. This ethnographic approach is essential for understanding the lived experiences of people on the move, the policies and practices they protest, and thus the meaning of the comments they post on the public Facebook pages of UNHCR Libya. Building on the ground of digital methods (Rogers, 2013), I used the Netvizz application (Rieder, 2013) to collect data, including the user posts and comments posted on the UNHCR Libya Facebook page. The data consisted of 985 comments and 49 page user posts. In addition, there were 25 comments by the page owner (UNHCR). To analyse media formats, metadata about the content – text, picture and video – was also collected. As noted, UNHCR use this channel to advertise their services and interact with refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced and stateless persons in Libya, but also with the local public, as well as donors.

Thematic analysis

To analyse the online data and identify emerging themes and patterns of engagement on the Facebook page of UNHCR Libya, I follow Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis. Specifically, I read over the entire dataset to familiarize myself with the data before coding. To do so, I focused on the meaning of specific comments and considered them in their digital context; that is, as responses to original posts on the Facebook page or as responses to real-world events. After an initial review, 350 comments were manually rejected as non-pertinent for two reasons: first, tagged comments were excluded as they simply mention the name of another person. Typically, this is done to draw someone's attention to a post. As only a name is given, the comment does not

have substantive content. Second, fragmented and nonsensical comments were removed as they had no clear topic or meaning. For example, these included comments composed of isolated characters such as '**'.

Thus, 636 comments were subjected to analysis. Each comment was assigned a topic theme based on an inductive analysis of the comments text and the context of the original post the comment was responding to. Themes were defined by identifying the use of keywords such as: congratulations, EU, evacuation, UNHCR, help, jobs, solutions, detention centre, Libyan coast guard, human rights violation. After an initial categorization, all themes were revised to ensure consistency and remove ambiguities. In total, there were 12 discrete themes. As required, each comment was assigned multiple themes.

To facilitate analysis, discrete themes were clustered together into major thematic areas. At this point, another subset of comments was excluded from future analysis as they were not relevant for the focus of the study. This included comments on the theme of praise, primarily consisting of short expressions of gratitude without specific details. The results and themes are described below.

Ethical considerations

All the content extracted for this study is publicly accessible. Nevertheless, there are ethical concerns when using online data to study people on the move, particularly as online content could be unfairly used against them without their knowledge. Data collection is not an apolitical exercise – it requires regulated methods of oversights and accountability. After all, Facebook users in general do not expect to become research subjects and the lines between technological, humanitarian and financial interests in data extraction are often blurred (Taylor et al., 2016; Zimmer, 2010). While it is important to protect user privacy and security – and therefore I anonymized all users – it is fundamental to consider an ethical position that recognizes the importance of making political claims more visible. I followed AoIR's (Franzke et al., 2020) recommendations for ethical decision-making, engaging with personal data in a manner that protects privacy and 'does not further disempower groups and communities on the margins' (Clark-Parsons and Lingel, 2020: 5).

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, it is a small study that is limited to a single Facebook page over the course of a year. As such, it is not representative of the wider online activities of people on the move in Libya. Second, the study only considers public interactions given the limitations on API access to Facebook, albeit violating platforms' terms of use (see Bruns, 2019; Freelon, 2018). However, as the study concerns the capacity of people on the move to claim rights, the publicly available data is deemed sufficient to understand the key themes driving these claims. Nevertheless, a richer understanding would necessitate an analysis of media activity in closed spaces (e.g. private Facebook groups) as well as qualitative research on the participants. This is an important avenue for future research. Second, an important limitation to be considered is the fact that researchers mainly rely on the free API access to platforms that put the

access to data in the hands of the social media tech companies (Boyd and Crawford, 2012). Finally, if we are to accept that Facebook functions as one of the archons of data colonialism (Couldry et al., 2018), then alternative research methods need to emerge to resister colonial power, such as 'counter-mapping' and 'counter-archiving' (Ben-David, 2020) to decolonize the digital and what remains.

Results

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis, an initial breakdown of the 986 comments on the UNHCR Libya Facebook page was coded. Of these, 291 were in English, 344 were in Arabic and 50 were in other languages such as Tigrinya, Somali and French, translated into English. As noted, fragmented and tagged comments have been excluded (350), as well as short expressions of gratitude without specific details (330). When these comments were removed, the individual themes were clustered into three major thematic areas. These concerned:

(1) UNHCR and UNHCR services: This major theme includes comments mentioning the protection mandate of the organization, the practices for registering refugees in Libya, issues of evacuation from Libya, accusations of corruption and claims about the lack of transparency over resettlement to third countries.

(2) EU and EU policies: This major theme includes comments mentioning the European policies of externalization and the EU-sponsored life-saving flights from Libya to Niger and the interception operation at sea by the Libyan coast guard to prevent boats reaching Europe.

(3) Human rights issues: This major theme includes comments highlighting conditions in detention and requesting support including durable solutions for refugees, education and housing opportunities.

These key issues within these themes are discussed below.

Blaming UNHCR

The dominant topic of comments concerned accusations about the conduct of UNHCR. Some 59 comments directly mentioned the 'UNHCR' and the lack of support. This includes speculation about nefarious intentions – *'What is the commission? It is racism, bribes, or certain personalities that we did not know'* (Facebook comment, November 2018) – and criticism of specific practices. In particular, the registration procedures for refugees in Libya were explicitly blamed, and corruption claims and complaints about the lack of transparency were frequent. The latter is exemplified by the following comment: '*Indeed, there is a problem of honesty, discrimination, and hate that is very arbitrary*' (Facebook comment, November 2018). The comments express frustration regarding the lack of clarity over registration procedures that are limited to specific nationalities. Users accused UNHCR of being 'weak', 'a fictitious organization', 'without principles' or full of 'other interests'.

In response to these accusations, UNHCR clarified that: *'UNHCR in Libya is only allowed to work with specific nationalities, as per the government's instructions'* (UNHCR Libya comment, December 2018). UNHCR also clarified that '*services are free, and we must be notified as soon as possible if any employee asks you for a sum of money in exchange for the services provided'* (UNHCR Libya comment, December 2018). However, users accused UNHCR of being 'racist toward certain nationalities' and described experiences of inaction and lack of support. In particular, the organization was accused of 'being too slow' and waiting until people are in danger before acting.

More generally, the comments in this theme questioned the availability of UNHCR – 'where is UNHCR?' – and requests for action and intervention: *'UNHCR Libya should take action to protect asylum seekers. Do not turn your back on them!'* (31 October 2018). Visual appropriation of the UNHCR logo was also used to direct blame at the organization. Referring to the logo, which depicts an individual shielded by protective hands, one user wrote: *'Their symbol didn't reveal the service they give. They set us on fire and radicalize our sorrow.'* Thus, it was expressed that UNHCR is 'treating refugees like animals'. In many instances, such criticism referenced specific encounters with UNHCR staff and the lack of specific resources: *'people die in detention without care or due to lack of medicine. Why are international organizations watching?'* (Facebook comment, December 2018).

Another common complaint within this theme is a perceived lack of information, which generates uncertainty: 16 comments were direct requests for specific procedures, including family reunification, education or registration. Without access to official information, people on the move struggle to make decisions about the future and how to act. The sense of frustration is clearly captured in the following comment:

> *'I went to the organization many times without getting an answer from them and we are waiting in the hope that we hear something new that gives hope and optimism. Please reply, especially we put us very critical* [sic] *and we are in danger. Do we ride the sea and leave to escape* [sic] *or what?'* (Facebook comment, December 2018).

Some comments blame UNHCR by appealing to international human rights standards. They ask about the 'official recognition' of their refugee status under the Geneva Convention and call for inclusion in the UNHCR decision-making. Others present more personal appeals based on their circumstances and fears. Other users posed questions such as: '*Why don't I get any help from UNHCR as a victim?'* This was one of 12 questions in a post by a Somali asylum seeker living in Libya for two years. It was accompanied by a picture of him holding his child: *'This is my child and he was born in Ain Zara prison in August this year.'* In other instances, users affirm their status as refugees and express confusion that this is not recognized by UNHCR: '*Do we spend this period without hope that you do not know that we are oppressed by the oppression, and injustice of the authoritarian regimes in the countries that we escaped from*' (Facebook comment, November 2018).

Thus, there is a commonality to the complaints that blame UNHCR for inaction and in the process of attributing blame, people on the move affirm their identity and convey their experiences.

Blaming the EU

The second major theme concerned the EU and its policies. Some 38 comments directly mentioned the 'EU' and its policies while 63 comments additionally mentioned the 'UN' or 'UNHCR' in relation to the EU policies. In this respect, some comments directly address the relationship between the two organizations and question whether UNHCR is fully representing the needs of people on the move. For example, some users asked *'Has the UN made any representations to the EU to halt or amend its support for interceptions and returns by the Libyan coastguard. And if not, why not?'* (Facebook comment, December 2018), and *'Why not bring this issue to the political institutions especially in Europe in charge of migration? Either Europe or any other country in the world can absorb all the migrants in Libya or let them go home'* (Facebook comment, December 2018). Unsurprisingly, references to Europe and the EU are frequently invoked to request 'safe travel' or 'evacuation to a European country'. As the comments above indicate, this can extend beyond personal requests to argue for the rights and needs of people on the move generally.

Indeed, the most in-depth comments were those in which accusations were directed at the European Neighbourhood Policy, an EU foreign relations instrument which supports the Libyan coastguard to intercept people at sea and prevent them reaching EU countries. For example, comments critique the reality of this arrangement: *'human beings suffering atrocities, babies, children, victims of torture from years, repeatedly pushed back by the EU through the Libyan coastguard'* (Facebook comment, December 2018). In addition to blaming the EU, there was a more complex, localized dynamic of blame that focused on the violations happening in Libyan detention centres as a result of EU policy. As one user explains:

> *'European governments are well aware of the conditions of asylum seekers and migrants, but they only care about the decreasing number of arrivals. EU don't give attention to the deaths of migrants in Libya, in legal detention centre, due to brutal daily biting [sic] by militias.'*

In making these claims, people on the move disrupt official narratives and attempt to rupture the opaque framing of EU policy with visceral descriptions of their lived experiences. Some use highly descriptive terms such as 'evil of Babylonian' and 'lager' (a term used to describe the Nazi concentration camps) to describe the feeling of being deprived of freedom at the EU's border.

Human right violations

The third major theme concerns human rights claims and accusations of human rights violations. Users ask for help and assistance and they pose specific questions and demands. As indicated in the following example, these comments reveal the inhuman conditions in which the migrants live:

> *'We were under UNHCR 1 year and we were in Libyan jails. Also we don't have meal or where we sleep every 24 times we eat one time little food also we don't have a freedom on the other*

hand we are under 15 years old and our country is Somalia . . . this is my file number you can review back and my names . . . further information follow my Facebook'. (Facebook comment, December 2018)

The inclusion of file numbers is a common feature of the comments as people on the move seek direct support and assistance from UNHCR.

Comments concerning human rights violations also provide a visual documentation of conditions in detention. Some 10 photos of detention conditions were posted on the UNHCR page.

Visual elements were also posted on the page by the users, such as pictures taken in detention. Of these, one notable example is a photo of a protest in January 2019. The photo was posted by an asylum seeker from Darfur who had been living in detention for two years. He wrote *'Where is your humanity? "WE ARE HERE". We are refugees in a detention centre in the Libyan capital.'* The photo depicted a group of young people holding up a handmade poster featuring a symbolic UNHCR figure who hears nothing, sees nothing and says nothing. Similarly, another visual post depicted an ironic subversion of the UNHCR logo. On one side, the logo is faithfully replicated: a pair of hands provides a protective shield around an individual. On the other side, the position of the hands is inverted, casting the individual down into flames. All the comments discussed in this study reflect an effort to appropriate the public page of UNHCR in Libya to a certain extent. The visual contributions take that appropriation further to highlight, in creative ways, the gulf between the professed aims and public image of UNHCR and the actual conditions and experiences of those detained in Libya.

Finally, human rights issues are also raised by other actors. Activists, journalists and other advocates used the public Facebook page to ask UNHCR to provide food and evacuation or to denounce human right violations. For example, one appeal was published by a human rights lawyer:

'All refugees in Sabha are registered with UNHCR and are clearly in an exceptionally inhuman and urgent situation, subjected to an incredibly violent and abusive police team, and neither UNHCR or IOM are being able to offer meaningful protection, support or assistance whilst they are detained.' (Facebook comment, November 2018)

Others publish posts directly on the public page and attempt to coordinate a campaign through the use of common hashtags: *'the refugees detained in Qaser Bin Ghashir are without food, water and electricity. Some are sick, have TB, a woman gave birth only a month ago. We beg UNHCR Libya to immediately #evacuaterefugeesfromlibya. Please they need help'* (User post, January 2019). Thus, the public page of UNHCR provides a space for alliances in which people on the move can make themselves visible and allies can lobby on their behalf.

While the themes discussed here represent only a portion of the total comments posted on the UNHCR in Libya page, they are an important indication of how people on the move can use digital media to create a space of appearance in which their lives and needs are made visible and the official narratives of UNHCR and the EU are contested.

Discussion

The comments discussed in this study provide a window into how people on the move use digital media to articulate lived experience, personalize their calls for recognition and challenge the system of control that denies them freedom. The digital traces left by people on the move are extremely important, not only as a collective experience of shared feelings and traumas, but also as strong, self-narrated appeals to human rights and social justice. While they try to expose and challenge the EU's deadly border policy, they also insist on the complicity of UNHCR in the tragedy unfolding in Libya.

However, it must be noted that understanding the meaning of the comments and their significance can be challenging as it is necessary to first understand the context of their lived experiences and the policy contexts they protest. Moreover, the ability of people on the move to occupy a space of appearance is not equally distributed. A digital divide still exists. It is based on unequal access to the internet, digital skills and resources, as well as more fundamental literacy skills. As noted, a large number of comments were excluded from the analysis because they were too fragmented to form a coherent expression. Thus, in championing the capacity of some people on the move to articulate their experiences and anger, it is important to recognize that some may be unable to do so. Nevertheless, we may consider the implications of the comments in terms of human rights and social justice.

The 'right to reclaim a narrative'

The comments represent an effort to 'reclaim narratives' and contest conditions of oppression. These forms of activism from the margins are performative acts of resisting control and exposing rights violations. They are communicative acts that interrogate the human cost of European policies. By participating on the UNHCR public page, people on the move are re-defining who is allowed to speak as a political subject in the European communicative order. They are claiming the 'right to look' (Mirzoeff, 2011: 474), which connects the act of looking with political subjectivity and collectivity. Digital practices enable the possibility of exerting political agency, reclaiming subjectivity and raising awareness of shared grievances and injustices. Ultimately, they present conditions in which to mobilize individually and collectively. From this perspective, it is clear that issues of representation and political subjectivity are often inexorably intertwined with the wider discourses of dominant power structures, specifically, the institutionally functional logic of border control between the EU, Libya and UNHCR.

Building on these insights, I focus here particularly on practices of digital self-representation and how they seek to intervene in public discourse. In terms of claiming a political voice, these practices offer a rich insight into key questions, including the right to define one's own narrative and the contestation of institutional narratives. For this purpose, the political implications of these digital self-representation practices and the collective action that can be generated need to be taken into consideration. In Arendt's (1963: 33) terms, these acts 'constitute that space of appearances where freedom can unfold its charms and become a visible, tangible reality'. Arendt's conceptual framework foregrounds the key starting point for understanding the practices of those who live in a regime of enforced invisibility and exclusion: the act of representing oneself in public.

In this case, these are acts of resistance performed online that enable people on the move in Libya to escape their roles and the rules that oppress them. Crucially, it enables them to challenge that 'moral suasion' that labels them as beneficiaries of assistance or vulnerable individuals with traumatic stories. In contrast, they are disclosing their individuality, sharing their personal experiences and claiming the right to be 'free', in the Arendtian sense of the term. As people on the move in Libya lack durable and recognized legal protection – as Libya is not a signatory to the Geneva Convention – they mobilize at their peril in detention centres controlled and managed by armed groups. Their protests can therefore be read as a brave 'interruption of the UNHCR's monopoly over the language of protection, care, and resettlement' (Moulin and Nyers, 2007) where their right to speak, participate and be heard is reaffirmed.

Conceptually, these narratives can be considered as a performative practice, where the posting, tagging and sharing mechanism allow the story to be more visible. If we consider these digital practices as an attempt to (re)politicize the border as a contested humanitarian space, following (Stavinoha, 2019), it is crucial to reveal how these practices resist and contest the EU's border regime of externalization and expose border practices or violations that are affecting people's lives. While the EU is counting on UNHCR to ensure that the migration management and asylum system in Libya is consistent with the main international standards and human rights, people on the move in Libya are dealing daily with serious human rights violations, including grave and widespread abuses happening inside and outside official detention centres. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, are unable to deliver justice, however, but offer a space to record and document these violations, calling for the world to see. With the act of posting and denouncing violations, people trapped in detention in Libya claim their 'communication rights' (Leurs, 2017), and capture their experiences over time to create a community of support. This may also open an interesting space for human rights advocates and activists around the world living and working with communities affected by violations in documenting crimes for potential evidentiary value. And while the UN call for 'those guilty of crimes to be held to account', detention centres are attacked and hundreds of people killed. It is in the midst of this conflict that people on the move in Libya remain often hidden from the public and excluded from national debates in Europe. With their act of posting '*I HOPE, ONE DAY, I WILL HAVE RIGHT TO SPEAK and I will have the right to spread and to show the world what happens to the refugees and obstacles they face throughout their journey'* and sharing their pictures from inside the detention centre, they connect their struggles with distant audiences; in a strategy to share their experiences with a wider public, to 'enact themselves as citizen subjects' (Isin and Nielsen, 2008: 189) in spaces where it is possible to resist conventions, in a form that makes rights claimed by digital acts possible.

Conclusion

This article seeks to create novel insights into the role and effects that Facebook or other social media platforms may have in the promotion and protection of human rights for people on the move in Libya, but also in developing new ways of mobilization, participatory democracy and civic engagement, translating them into the more traditional

forms of public protest and direct action that can engage citizens, diaspora and activists in Europe. I argue that people on the move in Libya assert themselves as political subjects through communicative 'acts of citizenship', using social platforms by granting additional means of self-expression and active deliberation, asserting themselves as visible political subjects, making claims but also denouncing the human rights violations (Stavinoha, 2019). Social media, such as Facebook, have been playing an important role in establishing external linkages and drawing global attention to the situation in detention centres in Libya and connecting people on the move with activists in Europe. Their issues might otherwise have gone unnoticed and their struggles silenced. By placing these communicative practices in the context of current European border politics of externalization, the article argues that the use of digital networks transforms the burden of being trapped in Libya into a digital experience of alliance and moral support from afar.

Specifically, the study finds that the use of digital networks connects people trapped in Libya not just with friends, relatives and families, but also with legal representatives and activists which allows the creation of 'transnational support networks'. At the same time, access to the digital world is tenuous and can also result in stricter surveillance and punitive measures. This is especially true in settings like Libya where the power differentials between armed groups, UN agencies, international NGOs, EU policy makers and the affected communities are already stark. Further research can play an important role in understanding the role and effects that Facebook or other social media may have in the promotion and protection of human rights for people on the move in Libya, but also in developing new ways of mobilization. Investigating this 'space of appearance' is key to understanding how the 'voice' is channelled and how the network of visibility operates; in particular, from the perspective of the convergence of public media and personal communication (Meikle, 2018) but also by examining the potential or the risk for people on the move to use the media in enabling resistance and opening up space for alternatives. But, it is important to remember that visual material as pictures and video can also be used or shared by smuggling networks to extort money. The route of extortion has expanded beyond Libya, involving a transnational network with people in Khartoum or Egypt and represents a real nightmare for families in Europe or North America. A recent report from INTERPOL (2016) on migrant smuggling networks highlights that 'social media is also an important tool widely used by migrants and recruiters alike to diffuse information about routes, services, and prices.' Eritreans and Somalis have begun to be targets of organized criminals who abduct, kidnap and take them hostage in order to extort ransom money from their relatives.

Finally, the significance of digital spaces for protest and rights claiming are important in light of the increasingly market-oriented nature of humanitarian communication including the UN and its agencies. The findings highlight the importance of designing effective and inclusive communication practices that engage and afford agency to those affected by crisis, mainly in understanding how the internet and access to communication can bring change (Poell and Van Dijck, 2015) into the everyday lives of those who lack power and privilege, in raising their voices to challenge injustice and enhance accountability.

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Note

1. In 2020, the International Organization for Migration estimated the total number of migrants in Libya to be over 800.000.

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Author biography

Sara Creta is an award-winning journalist and documentary filmmaker, with extensive experience investigating human rights abuses. Over the past years, she has reported from Sudan, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, DRC, Libya, Chad, Cameroon, Morocco, Tunisia, the Gaza Strip and a rescue ship in the Mediterranean. Currently she is pursuing her doctorate at the School of Communications of Dublin City University under the Future of Journalism Institute. With an academic background in International cooperation and protection of Human Rights, she focuses much of her research on how dissident actors use internet technologies in affecting political action vis-a-vis the horn of Africa region and politics. For her research, she has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action.