

# **SYRISCHE ASIELMIGRANTEN IN NEDERLAND EN HET GEBRUIK VAN SOCIALE MEDIA BIJ MIGRATIEBESLUITVORMING**

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## MANAGEMENTSAMENVATTING ENGELS

This report describes a study into the role of social media in migration decision-making by Syrian asylum migrants in the Netherlands. This study is based on personal interviews with 54 Syrian immigrants who received a residence status in the Netherlands. The majority of them arrived in the Netherlands in 2015, before the refugee agreements of the EU with Turkey. Based on a semi-structured interview guideline we inquired about their social media use in advance of, during and after their journey to the Netherlands.

### *Operationalization of social media*

A general definition of social media is: “a group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content.”

This study focused on two key affordances of social media: (1) the exchange of ‘user generated content’ and (2) communication on a ‘many-to-many’ basis. User generated content is contributed by the end-users of an online application instead of websites functioning as individual broadcast channels. Many-to-many communication is a form of communication in which a large number of end-users is contributing content that potentially reaches a large public. Information that is shared on social media is therefore often publically or semi-publically accessible. It does not only reach an existing group of persons to whom it is directly addressed, but also others with access to the medium and venue.

The key findings of this research are as follows:

### *Relevance of various information sources*

- Existing social ties are the most important source of information accessed by Syrian asylum migrants in advance of their journey to the Netherlands. Communication with these ties often takes place via social media.
- A majority of our respondents also used social media to access online information and latent ties. This is not their primary source of information.
- Information from mass media such as television, newspapers and radio plays a very marginal role in migration decision-making.
- We encountered several differences in the use of various information sources based on gender, age and level of education. Even though our research was not based on a representative sample of Syrian asylum migrants, our findings adhere to the ‘digital divide’ thesis. Younger asylum migrants make more use of internet sources than older migrants, men more than women and the higher educated more than the lower educated.

### *Access to and use of social media*

- Internet access is not always available in Syria due to power outages.

- Two thirds of our respondents had internet access during their journey to the Netherlands.
- By far the most used device to access internet and social media is the smartphone (both in advance and during the journey). Syrian asylum migrants use local sim cards to gain internet access in countries through which they are travelling.
- WhatsApp, Skype, Google Maps en Facebook are the most frequently used social media applications. Besides these, many asylum migrants make use of Google's search engine to look up information about various destinations.
- In advance of leaving Syria, our respondents primarily used social networking sites, VoIP services and video-sharing applications. During migration most popular applications were online GPS and maps. Instant messaging services were very popular throughout the migration process.
- Most Syrian asylum migrants in our study used both publically accessible websites and applications as well as (semi-) private communities and groups.

*The role of online contacts and information before, during and after the journey*

- Online information plays a substantial role in preparation of migration. Via social media and other online sources, asylum migrants gather information on various routes, life in the Netherlands as a destination country and the duration of the asylum procedure.
- Social media are primarily used to access user generated content and to communicate with existing social ties. Only in a minority of cases they are used to actively connect with relevant latent ties.
- Our respondents based their choice for the Netherlands as a destination mostly on information that was distributed in existing social networks. Only a minority based their choice for the Netherlands on information and contacts that they gathered via social media. They did not have access to this information via their personal networks.
- Most Syrian asylum migrants had some knowledge of Dutch asylum laws and regulations. Also for this type of information, personal networks were the most important source.
- Nearly all Syrian asylum migrants payed smugglers for (parts of) their journey to the Netherlands. Social media did not play a role in first contacting them and again personal networks were the most important source of information. Once the first contact with a smuggler was made, social media did play an important role in communication and making practical agreements about the trip.
- Important benefits of online information that were named by our respondents are the scale of information that is available, access to information based on personal experiences and the topicality of information. Trustworthiness of information is named as an important downside of online information.

- Syrian asylum migrants deem information retrieved from online communication with existing ties more trustworthy than information that is freely available on the internet – for example in Facebook groups.
- An example of latent ties that are created via social media is contact with other asylum migrants who made use of the services of the same migrant smuggler. Via these contacts and online reviews asylum migrants check the trustworthiness of migrant smugglers.

#### *Contacts with others in Syria after arrival in the Netherlands*

- Instant messaging- and VoIP-services are the most frequently used media to communicate with family and friends who stayed in Syria.
- Syrian asylum migrants in the Netherlands are regularly approached by others for advice about migrating to the Netherlands or Europe. In most cases people inquire about information on and experience with migration to the Netherlands and life in the Netherlands.
- Two fifth of the respondents advises others to migrate to the Netherlands. They say that the Dutch are friendly and hospitable and that the Netherlands is a safe country to live. One fifth of the respondents dissuades other Syrians to migrate to the Netherlands. The dangerous journey of coming to the Netherlands and the length of the asylum procedure are the most prominent reasons to discourage others to come to the Netherlands. The other two fifth in some cases advises others to come while in other cases they dissuade others to migrate to the Netherlands.

#### *Conclusions*

Social media have two important affordances for asylum migrants. Firstly, they are a rich source of (semi-) public 'user generated content'. This information is appreciated for its topicality and experience-based character. Asylum migrants are searching for 'trusted information'. This type of information is preferred over information that is directly coming from government agencies.

Secondly, social media are used for social networking with existing social ties. For 87% of our respondents, the Netherlands was their first choice of destination. This was mainly due to the presence of existing social ties in the Netherlands. Communication with these friends or family members – via social media or other communication media – played an important role in their migration decision-making. Only a minority of our respondents used social media to actively contact 'latent ties' that became available via the infrastructure of social media.

