Social Media in and Around a Temporary Large-Scale Refugee Shelter in the Netherlands

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Abstract
During the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe, temporary refugee shelters arose in the Netherlands to shelter the large influx of asylum seekers. The largest shelter was located in the eastern part of the country. This shelter, where tents housed nearly 3,000 asylum seekers, was managed with a firm top-down approach. However, many residents of the shelter—mainly Syrians and Eritreans—developed horizontal relations with the local receiving society, using social media to establish contact and exchange services and goods. This case study shows how various types of crisis communication played a role and how the different worlds came together. Connectivity is discussed in relation to inclusion, based on resilient (non-)humanitarian approaches that link society with social media. Moreover, we argue that the refugee crisis can be better understood by looking through the lens of connectivity, practices, and migration infrastructure instead of focusing only on state policies.

Keywords
refugees, emergency shelter, crisis communication, social media, resilience

Introduction
During the fall of 2015, over 1.2 million refugees arrived in the Mediterranean area and traveled further into Europe seeking asylum (Refugee Work Netherlands, 2016). European leaders struggled to find a mutual solution for the sudden increase of migration into Europe, and the refugee discourse became polarized in the European receiving countries (Polakow-Suransky, 2016). Policy makers, media, and European civilians named the situation the “refugee crisis” (Spindler, 2015). Since then, numerous studies have tried to explain migration streams rather than focusing only on national policies in combination with “the labor market, or migrant social networks” (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014, p. S122); researchers can better understand migration patterns by looking through the lens of migration infrastructure that includes institutions, actors, and interlinked technologies (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). As some have found, encounters between “us” and “them” at the European borders failed in reproducing hierarchies of humanity and facilitating ethics of inclusion (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2017).

In the Netherlands, the crisis situation led to many fierce protests regarding the intentions of (local) governments to shelter huge numbers of refugees in temporary emergency shelters. There is no doubt that a suitable crisis approach was lacking, and most Dutch municipalities where protests took place withdrew initiatives regarding integration issues in reaction to the protests (Dagevos & Odé, 2016). In this article, we see a crisis as a societal situation that gets out of hand. It refers to the perception of an unpredictable event that influences the expectations of the parties involved and in such a way that it greatly influences how those parties work, ultimately generating negative results (Coombs, 2007). During a crisis, a society tends to be out of balance and governments try to control the situation based on the chaos and disorder they perceive. Therefore, we cannot separate the consequences of a societal crisis from the approach related to that crisis (Smets et al., 2017).

The way European governments handled situations concerning the refugee crisis is similar to or can be compared with a top-down management approach (Hadfield & Zwitter, 2015). With such an approach, all actions are aimed at controlling the situation. Authorities who strive for control leave...
less space for bottom-up, spontaneous, and unstructured actions (Drabek & McEntire, 2003; Henstra, 2010). After all, those actions only lead to more chaos. The refugee shelter approach was no exception—we could therefore also call the "refugee crisis" a policy or institutional crisis (Alink et al., 2001). The problem was not the asylum seekers but the way in which the formal organizations and governments approached and handled the situation and the subsequent reactions (Rast et al., 2020).

This raises questions about where the urge to control the crisis came from and what the consequences were for the parties involved, and of course for the asylum seekers themselves. It is obvious that many European countries, including the Netherlands, were not prepared to deal with the arrival and shielding of so many asylum seekers at once. The Netherlands established emergency shelters in an ad hoc manner. These shelters had austere facilities and were called "bed, bath, bread." During asylum seekers' stays in these temporary shelters, only their basic needs were met. Families, and individuals, were placed in a tent camp, old factory, or sport hall, and beginning in October 2015, nearly 3,000 of these people eventually became residents of the largest temporary refugee shelter in the Netherlands: a tent camp called Heumensoord, near the city of Nijmegen. Refugees arriving in the Netherlands first had to reside in makeshift settings such as Heumensoord. Staying in some sort of temporary refugee facility is still part of the Dutch refugee recognition process.

Almost all of the temporary shelters were managed by the governmental sheltering organization, Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers (COA), which works under the direct responsibility of the Dutch Ministry of Safety and Justice. In contrast to asylum seekers' reception in the regular system, asylum seekers in the temporary shelters often did not have access to cooking facilities and did not receive any additional financial help beyond the bed, bath, and bread (meals) they received at the shelter facilities. Although they had freedom of movement, practical and logistical issues made actual movement difficult. Asylum seekers' stays in the temporary camps were supposed to be brief—around a maximum of 9 weeks for Heumensoord, according to the municipality's website when the shelter opened—but almost all residents stayed in the camps far longer, up to 5 or 6 months. Afterward, most of them were relocated to other temporary shelters or existing asylum seeker reception centers in the Netherlands.

This article looks at how newcomers contacted each other and the receiving society in Nijmegen, focusing on the usage of social media to establish this contact. We aimed to understand the top-down approach of (semi-)governmental organizations, the consequences of that approach, and the (counter-)reactions to it. Our main research question was the following:

**Research Question:** Why did the different parties in and around the shelter use social media and how did that usage contribute to their resilience?

The methods used for this research include many participating observations in and around the refugee shelter. In addition, 12 interviews were conducted with former residents and independent volunteers from Nijmegen during the period of November 2016 to January 2017. One of the co-authors is a former resident of the Heumensoord shelter, having stayed there for 5.5 months. Another co-author is a communication advisor and was the main online community manager of the social media groups in Nijmegen. Both contributed voluntarily to forming a bridge between asylum seekers and Nijmegen residents on social media. Thus, in addition to the interviews, we were able to include the personal experiences of both authors and Facebook posts from residents and locals in our data. After the shelter closed, the two co-authors established the Yalla Foundation (www.yallafoundation.nl) with which they try to continue their bridging, advising, and informing efforts. In our study, the positionality of the researchers created different degrees of insiderness andoutsiderness. The sense of insiderness developed and led to an in-depth understanding of what happens in the camp. Interviews were recorded with the interviewee's consent and transcribed verbatim. We followed Tracy's (2020) coding process. Using primary cycle coding, we began by allocating first-level codes to text fragments. This was followed by axial coding and data analysis. During the data analysis, we linked inductive and deductive material in such a way that insights and patterns could be developed.

This study provides insight into the role of social media in the integration process during a time of crisis. We first discuss connectivity and crisis communication in theory, followed by a description of the location and organization of the Heumensoord shelter facility. We then focus on the COA staff at the shelter and their activities. Finally, we show how asylum seekers in Heumensoord contacted Nijmegen locals through social media. Their social media usage caused reactions from formal parties such as the COA. Our research shows the roles that different types of communication played within the temporary shelter and how that communication influenced the well-being of the Heumensoord residents.

**Connectivity and Crisis Communication**

The "refugee crisis" was characterized by the unpredictable character of the refugee influx. Many people had to be sheltered in a short period, but the standard procedures no longer provided solutions (Galindo & Batta, 2013). In crisis situations, it seems as if there is a natural law that has to do with the way in which actors assess the situation. Thus, if a situation is framed as chaos, people try to apply control strategies to regain control of the situation (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; van Buuren et al., 2016). Unstructured actions to survive the crisis are quickly assessed by civilians and governments as an attack on social structures and the cause of even more chaos rather than as a potential contribution to solving the problem. This applies not only to the approach but also to
Connective action can be seen as a culture of bonds that links people from local and global levels. Migrants and refugees have created and maintained a culture of bonds that has become part of local and global systems based on information and communication technologies. In addition to being connected, refugees have become part of an overexpanding surveillance culture commonly associated with neoliberalism that makes use of barrier zones and electronic screening zones (Diminescu, 2008).

Neoliberalism determines how humanitarian emergency governance can protect and shelter refugees in refugee camps by providing accommodation, food, medicine, and infrastructure projects. It also promotes self-governance and development of entrepreneurship that will improve their futures. In this context, one speaks about resilience humanitarianism, which includes empowerment and development of camps as communities and refugees as residents. Applying this approach would call for changing temporary places into more permanent settlements (Ilcan and Rygiel, 2015). Such development asks for resilience that includes operational experimental welfare abandonment under the control of pervasive security surveillance. However, resilience that requires ongoing adaptation can harm the development of sustainable systems. Under circumstances of constant adaptation, a resilience of ruins can be developed instead of a progressive survivalism that enables improvisation and the development of bricolage in relation to contemporary communications, infrastructure, architecture, and social capital (Duffield, 2016). This may look like a great opportunity for improving for sheltering refugees, but Ilcan and Rygiel (2015) and Duffield (2016) criticize this neoliberal use of resilience. They argue that a focus on resilience, self-reliance, and self-development is misused to dismantle sustainable structures needed for well-being. Instead of bottom-up community-driven approaches, this results in individual forms of resilience that is still occurring within ruins (so shitty situations to live in and still distanced from normality) and that is distanced from society at large.

Today, as well as during the crisis, migrants and refugees use social media widely to obtain insights about migration and possibilities for settling down (Dekker et al., 2018; Kim & Smets, 2020). Social media also contribute to connecting them with friends, family, and people who are not part of their social networks, and such connections can improve their well-being, inclusion, and integration at the initial stages of relocation and resettlement. Social media also provide access to jobs, sports, education, community events, and health care services, which help refugees in settling down. Finally, social media can be used as learning platforms where information about the culture, people, language, and geography of the new country can be gathered and exchanged (Ahmed & Veronis, 2018; Marlowe, 2020). Therefore, social media—which provide relatively cheap access to communication and information—can be seen as a weapon of the weak that offers refugees access to public and hidden transcripts that provide them with official information and advice (Scott, 1985). Dekker et al.
(2018) see refugees who use social media prior to and during migration as “smart” refugees. Such refugees employ means of obtaining access to social media, judging the quality of the obtained information, and avoiding government surveillance. In this, social ties are a trusted source (Dekker et al., 2018; Misztal, 1996).

The flip side of social media is that these media are not always trustworthy. They can also provide opportunities for spreading intolerance, false information, and exclusionary forces that can lead to places of non-belonging that reinforce hegemonic structures, racist ideologies, and oppressive practices (Dekker et al., 2018; Marlowe, 2020). Moreover, social media can be time-consuming or even addictive, which can distract attention away from responsibilities (Ahmed & Veronis, 2018).

Refugees use online and offline connections to settle into their new environments. In this respect, integration can be seen as either a one-way or two-way process. A one-way process reflects assimilation, which implies that migrants should get rid of their own culture and adjust to the culture of their new society. In a two-way integration process, both the newcomers and those in the host society succeed in creating access to facilities such as schooling, housing, jobs, health, culture, and language. By joining hands, some sense of feeling at home will be developed. Here, a process of acculturation takes place in which majorities and minorities come together (Alencar, 2018).

The use of social media may hinder refugees’ integration in the receiving society, but it also offers possibilities of linking with people in their countries or areas of origin. Therefore, refugees are less dependent on the host community for finding and maintaining friendships (Alencar, 2018). According to Alencar (2018) and Komito (2011), it is unclear whether social media enable or hinder integration processes in different sections of society. However, social media can play a role in understanding and making use of governmental procedures and facilities (Alencar, 2018).

So far, we have discussed how social media play an important role in establishing connections related to place, especially in areas where it is difficult to settle down. However, connectivity in refugee camps predates social media. In other words, media technologies are constructed and produced frameworks of refugeedom—both today and in the past—which includes social relations, administrative practices, legal issues, and refugees’ experiences (Seuferling, 2019). Such a utilitarian approach to social media shows that social media’s role in emphasizing humanitarian aid and compassion differs from its role in the defense of refugee’s political rights to safe and dignified lives (Awad & Tossell, 2019). This resembles Leurs and Smets’s (2018) call for social justice for refugees.

We now turn to a discussion of the Heumensoord temporary shelter and its facilities and services. The friction between the top-down (push) ways of communication used by the formal organizations and the need for information (pull) shown by both Nijmegen locals and Heumensoord residents becomes obvious when researching social media communications about the shelter.

**Heumensoord**

Heumensoord is a forest area close to the city of Nijmegen, which has a population of 170,000 inhabitants, thousands of whom are students. When the temporary shelter was active, the municipality of Nijmegen was governed by a left-wing coalition in the city council that aimed for a social, sustainable, and entrepreneurial Nijmegen. The coalition wanted to make Nijmegen a sustainable and green city that helped vulnerable groups and ensured fair burden-sharing (City Council of Nijmegen, 2014).

Heumen is an adjacent municipality consisting of several smaller villages south of Nijmegen. The city council’s 17 members are a mix of liberals (right wing), Christian Democrats, Green Party, Labour Party, and Democrats Municipality of Heumen, a local party (Democraten Gemeente Heumen) (https://www.heumen.nl/, 29 March 2017).

In September 2015, the municipalities of Nijmegen and Heumen gave permission for the COA to build a temporary tent camp to shelter 3,000 asylum seekers in the Heumensoord area (Municipality Nijmegen and Heumen, 2016). To enable trucks to access the area, builders immediately started constructing a temporary asphalt road to an open area in the middle of the forest.

On 2 October 2015, the first phase of the shelter opened for residents. At that time, the shelter was still under construction, just the first tents were open, and they were called “Green Village.” This section consisted of eight large sleeping tents connected by a long corridor, temporary sanitary facilities like those found at music festivals, and one enormous activity and restaurant hall. There were beds for almost 800 individuals. The space outside was still muddy during that first period as the concrete plates of temporary pavement had not yet been installed. One resident said,

> It was very bad in the winter time when we were there, a lot of mud, water, and cold. I believe it was not qualified to host people to live in it, even for a short period.

After Green Village opened, builders went on to construct the next two sections, named “White Village” and “Purple Village.” The last section opened in November 2015.

Each sleeping tent could provide sleeping facilities for approximately 96 residents. The tents were divided by cardboard walls without doors into 12 sleeping areas with eight beds (four bunk beds). Each individual was assigned one bed and one compact metal locker for their personal property. Each sleeping “room” had eight electrical outlets/sockets, concentrated in one area. Residents whose beds were located far from that point were especially unhappy with the design.
The use of extension cords was not allowed because of fire regulations.

Sanitary facilities for almost 800 residents consisted of 14 toilets for men, 14 toilets for women, and 14 showers. These facilities, normally used for temporary camping places, had to be cleaned using ecologically friendly cleaning materials for environmental safety—to protect the drinking water. In practice, that meant using unscented cleaning materials, which resulted in a strong odor near those facilities. Later, the COA opened another recreation hall/restaurant facility in each part of the camp.

When Green Village was the only finished section, there were about 35 electrical sockets and limited Wi-Fi facilities in the biggest activity hall. Residents gathered near the sockets because of the enormous need to charge their mobile phones and to keep an eye on the devices while they charged in order to prevent theft. These mobile phones were the gateway to the outside world for residents and were thus of great importance.

The activity halls were also used for small concerts, children’s activities, watching television on big screens, playing table tennis and badminton, reading, and chatting. In the restaurant areas, three daily meals were provided in a tight time schedule: two meals with bread, and at night, a warm microwave meal in a plastic box. After a few weeks, washing machines were available for residents to wash their clothes.

Asylum seekers were assigned to sleeping tents without regard for their different backgrounds and personal situations. Therefore, it was possible that one section would house people with different genders, religions, ethnicities, ages, or family situations. The beds were assigned centrally. The diversity of roommates only reinforced the tension among people who had arrived in very stressful circumstances and who suddenly had to live together with many strangers. It caused people to ask for different beds, tents, or even camp sections. However, the COA only allowed changes in special cases. One resident said,

From different cultures, they are mixed together. Someone wants to smoke, the other wants to listen to music, the other wants to pray, the other wants to drink, and so on. So daily there are fights and shouts about the funny things. When any fight between two persons takes place, the solution of COA is just take this person from this room and put them in the next room, but they will see each other again because the division between the rooms is carton. Sometimes they send them to another village in the camp. (…) I can wait for one, two months, but at the end, I will explode. Usually my wife was crying, and the kids sometimes, when I ask them to go outside the room also were crying, the kids playing outside, I cannot explain always for them. Was big problem for me sometimes, when we are sitting in the room, you just hear from the next or opposite room, you hear some people are saying bad words, even husbands and wives, you hear everything what they do [having intercourse]. (…) I was in the restaurant. My son he went to the security (…) and he told him that our neighbour was killing a woman. The security went inside quickly. There was the wife and he heard some noise. The security thought the guy is killing the lady. He opened the curtain and got inside and then found them. The guy was shocked and fought with the security.

This section described Heumensoord and its facilities. We have shown that the infrastructure of the shelter was strictly regulated in the facilities it offered for refugees. However, shelter residents experienced scarcities concerning the use of social media within the shelter. In the next section, we shift to servicing in the shelter by the COA staff.

**COA Staff and Their Activities**

The COA was responsible for the residents and their safety, and it allowed chain partners (essential organizations) to enter the facility and provide services; such organizations included the Red Cross, the Dutch Refugee Council, the Municipality Health Service (GGD), and the Health Centre for Asylum seekers (GCA). Chain partners’ services included legal advice, basic health care, infectious disease prevention, and food safety. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND), which executes the legal asylum procedure, was not present within Heumensoord, except some informational gatherings.

Asylum seekers waited for several months in Heumensoord, and the first group were still Heumensoord residents when their legal asylum procedure started. During this procedure, which takes several days, many residents were not relocated to a normal COA procedure location but instead had to stay in the temporary tent camp (which by then had also become a procedure location). For 5 days, they would be transported daily to an IND hearing location in the country, where they would be interviewed as part of the asylum procedure.

In October 2015, nobody could estimate how long the large influx of migrants would continue and how long the residents would have to wait for their legal asylum procedure. The formal organizations that worked within the camp, such as the COA, Dutch Refugee Council, general practitioners, and municipalities, were all focused on fixed assigned tasks and were executing these tasks either inside or outside the shelter.

The way in which these employees or the organizations communicated with asylum seekers differed greatly, and they did not always reach their goal of using culturally sensitive communication to calm people down or meet bottom-up demands. Many asylum seekers were not satisfied with the centralized, top-down communication often used; that form of communication does not always reach its intended goals. In addition, little effort was made to modify communication styles according to asylum seekers and their cultural backgrounds. A considerable number of COA staff were young employees, many of whom were newly graduated social workers, and they seemed to lack the experience needed to work with asylum seekers. The staff worked
according to COA protocols. Rule Number 1 states, “Employees may not establish or maintain affective/intimate relations with residents” (COA, 2016). The impact of this rule was that employees and volunteers usually avoided personal contact with the residents. Even drinking a coffee together was often considered too much contact. The COA’s rules also mention the use of social media:

More and more people show themselves on the internet on diverse platforms and networks (Hyves®, Facebook, LinkedIn, or others). People’s profiles often contain a combination of both private and formal (connected to work) information. We are aware that the COA organization is therefore connected to personal opinions and lifestyles. (COA, 2016, p. 6)

There was a gap between the COA regime that wanted to control the crisis and the asylum seekers who wanted to connect and communicate with the outside world. Refugees showed how discontented they were during their stays in the shelter and during their integration processes. One resident wrote the following online:

We have a new life, a different life, culture, language, and system. And the COA works hard to keep us away from all ideas about that. All they can deliver are the words: “We don’t know.” “It is not our job.” (Heumensoord resident, 20 June 2016, source: Facebook group Refugees in the Netherlands Nijmegen)

The way in which the COA received asylum seekers was criticized as being what Goffman (2007) calls a “total institution.” Within a total institution, human needs are fulfilled by bureaucratic control over a group of people in an impersonal and rational way (Goffman, 2007). Most of the activities, such as eating, sleeping, recreation, and (voluntary) work, take place within the walls of a total institution and are separated from those who do not belong to the institution. Social interaction with the outside world is limited or lacking entirely. Boredom often causes perceived problems in intellectual and emotional well-being. In Heumensoord, the residents were clearly separated from the staff, which resulted in little contact and interaction between the two groups.

In practice, COA employees and volunteers “played it safe” regarding the use of social media. Shelter residents, professionals, and Dutch civilians at the shelter were flexible about the protocols, but things did not always go well, and they sought reliable partners outside the shelter’s gates when they felt too caged by these rules. Here, we see that connectivity between shelter residents and the COA staff was a difficult process that was dominated by a total institution and top-down interventions. In the next section, we elaborate on how bottom-up approaches were deployed—especially through the use of social media—to navigate and contest the COA’s top-down structure, not only by receiving societies and Heumensoord’s residents but also by staff members.

Contact Between Receiving Societies and Shelter Residents

From the first day the shelter opened its doors, Nijmegen and Heumen residents welcomed the temporary guests. A social worker and a communication advisor managed the Facebook page Welcome to Nijmegen, which was created weeks before the shelter opened. They and others stimulated many Nijmegen locals to prepare for the arrival of the camp’s temporary residents. Dozens of Nijmegen residents displayed welcoming signs on the first days of arrival, in early October 2015, near the entrance of the camp in the middle of the forest, against governmental and institutional advice not to show up. Directly after that, the Facebook group Refugees in the Netherlands Nijmegen acted as a platform where all group members could post or react to questions, offers, opinions, and needs.

The Welcome to Nijmegen Facebook page helped recruit nearly 2,000 volunteers from the receiving society for Steun- en Informatie Punt (STIP)-Noordopvang, an official new coordination point for volunteers at the facilities (approved by the COA). In this organization, a group of coordinating volunteers were active and were formally in touch with the COA’s activity coordinator. However, their offers to help were often not accepted because they did not meet the COA’s conditions for providing help inside the facilities. Also, there seemed to be too many offers for them all to reach particular facilities in accordance with the COA’s formal procedures.

To be approved by the COA, offers of help had to meet certain demands. For example, they had to treat residents equally to avoid jealousy, and they had to be safe. Because the number of residents was so enormous, however, many offers did not qualify. An offer of 1,000 drinking bottles was turned down because there were not enough bottles for each of the 3,000 residents to have one. Moreover, the distribution of (essential) goods had to take place in a quiet and safe way: it could not cause problems. For example, donated toys were not distributed for fear of causing fights between jealous children. The only time toys were given out was during the celebration of the Dutch holiday Saint Nicholas Day, when a group of volunteers were allowed to distribute a small, safe toy, one that was similar for every child. The COA’s rules also contained regulations about being continuously aware of the political climate and taking that into account while working. Such concerns could be another reason that some offers of help were refused.

According to one COA employee who coordinated activities for the residents, the COA had to quickly decide whether or not an offer was suitable and whether there was a volunteer capable and responsible enough to execute the offer according to COA protocols, taking safety rules into account. When coordinating a chess event with a volunteer, she advised the volunteer to call for chessboards using a local Facebook group set up for such purposes, instead of going
through the formal helpdesk, STIP. Through the Facebook group, 20 volunteers were also found to help with the chess event. When asked if she followed or used the Facebook group when she needed specific help, the COA employee responded,

I was not allowed to use that. I thought that I could make a Facebook page for internal usage, but that idea was refused (...). I could not use my account. We could not change those decisions. Instead we had to hang (...). A4 posters. That obviously does not work. You need people that tell other people about the activities. But we did what we could. I asked a volunteer, who made texts for everything. The only thing I was allowed to do was to make an email address for the residents (...).

This COA employee applied the top-down approach, but she preferred to work in a different way. She therefore used a local volunteer to call for specific help in order to use the power of social media.

In practice, it was several weeks before coordination of the voluntary offers began to take place and arrive in the facility. The camp residents sought more diverse activities or services that could meet their personal wishes or offers for establishing contact outside the facility with locals from Nijmegen. Hundreds of locals wanting to volunteer were independently offering assistance near the entrance of the facility or through the Facebook group Refugees in the Netherlands Nijmegen.

Locals were not allowed to enter the facility without a personal invitation from one of the residents themselves—and goods were not allowed to be distributed near the entrance or on the premises. It took about a month for the COA to devise the visiting rules, and once the rules were determined, the COA did not actively communicate them. Instead, the rules were informally communicated to residents who attended meetings in the camp. From then on, residents could invite locals to visit the facility. Visitors had to show their ID and register at the reception desk near the main entrance. Residents were responsible for their visitors' behavior during the visit.

When the shelter first opened its doors, people from Nijmegen could drive through the forest along the new asphalt road until they reached the main entrance of the camp. After the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015 (Bataclan), however, the COA placed a roadblock near the start of the road. This forced both residents and volunteers to walk or bike along the long road to the entrance. This was a (too) long walk for many, especially for families with small children.

The road and especially the parking lot at its entrance near Nijmegen quickly became a busy meeting point. Local citizens and asylum seekers met there to exchange goods or meet each other, and the appointments for that were often made through social media. Often, the place was very busy, and sometimes there was a grim atmosphere when many people wanted to exchange or claim goods at the same time. This was the case, for example, when a woman from Nijmegen arrived at the location with her car full of suitcases. She got frightened when many people ran toward her car and emptied it within seconds. People were fighting over the suitcases. Many locals used the Facebook group Refugees in the Netherlands Nijmegen to establish contact with Heumensoord residents. The group had the following purposes: to show gratefulness to the Netherlands/Nijmegen, to help each other with solving small problems, and to establish contact in order to start integrating and becoming part of Dutch society.

One of the Syrian residents started this Facebook group on the day Heumensoord opened. He wanted to create an instrument that reached the Dutch society and on which refugees could express their appreciation for that society. Two other founders, who were Dutch, worked as admins for the group from the first days and ensured that many Nijmegen locals entered this online platform through the Welcome to Nijmegen Facebook page. With both residents and locals in the group, an inclusive online community arose in which newcomers and locals could be in touch.

Soon the platform became very busy with group members’ posts, and the admins were asked many questions. On a daily basis, people were posting activities and necessities, as well as calls for contact—by Heumensoord residents or locals—with the aim of informally establishing contact. In June 2016, after the shelter closed its doors, the Facebook group had 6,750 group members, a mixed group of residents and locals. Still to this day, locals, former residents of the asylum seeker center in Heumensoord and another center in Nijmegen, and status holders in Nijmegen are active in the group, making language coaching connections or asking questions. The municipal health service and other such organizations also use this group to reach their target populations. The Facebook group therefore contributes to an inclusive society. Its aim is to continue to contribute to an inclusive society and to make small, informal help, understandable information, and contact possible. Here, we see that self-connected networks can improve connective action, encouraging engagement that links interactive digital media with easy-to-personalize action (see also Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

We have seen that the receiving community and the shelter residents cope with different infrastructures. The receiving community employs informal procedures which are characterized by a bottom-up approach, while the shelter residents have to cope with formal procedures which are parachuted top-down. Both groups could easily meet outside the shelter premises or through Facebook. Here, self-connections have led to the involvement of both groups where bottom-up approaches dominated. In the next section, the focus will shift to the topics of communication and the use of social media.
Connectivity and Infrastructure

Starting from the first day of the Heumensoord shelter and the start of the online platform Facebook group Refugees in the Netherlands Nijmegen, locals and shelter residents communicated with each other. Residents sometimes asked for essential goods, such as strollers, clothing, warm coats, and water boilers.

Residents invited locals to come for coffee, to eat together, or to visit a playground together. From both “sides,” individuals tried to establish contact. Residents who spoke English provided bridging—by translating between individuals in the camp and also online between asylum seekers and the local society. Many opinions were exchanged as well, which sometimes led to misunderstandings and conflicts. Despite these misunderstandings, the group sought for ways to cooperate. The administrators of the group therefore established an alternative Facebook group in Dutch for independent volunteers, called Independent Volunteers Nijmegen, and an informative, practical website in English that collected frequently given answers. On the Independent Volunteers Nijmegen page, the volunteer community shared information and experiences and discussed challenges, which increased their understanding about the shelter and asylum procedures and about communicating with residents of all cultures. The COA was not allowed to distinguish between residents, and it did not distribute donated goods randomly, except when those goods were available for all residents in the same quality and distributing the items would not cause problems. For 3,000 residents, this was rarely possible. Some English-speaking residents in a network with volunteers tried to obtain knowledge about what was necessary in each tent and to organize the informal distribution of donated goods in as honest a way as possible. In this way, hundreds of strollers were exchanged in the woods around the shelter and invitations were distributed as were hundreds of bikes, articles of clothing, shoes, and more. It was not possible to exchange these donated goods in an informal way within the shelter. The post below gives an example about how this exchange could be challenging:

I just returned from Heumensoord, and I found out that some people have and collect several goods, like strollers, and others have nothing. Often because they do not speak English or they are too modest. Maybe it is a possibility to talk with R.A.—a resident who was spreading items—about this. He took the responsibility to keep an overview on which family needs what, because many do not speak English or have access to social media. All help is welcome. ( . . . ) Helping and sharing is good karma ;-) (Nijmegen resident and independent volunteer, 1 December 2015, source: Facebook group Refugees in the Netherlands Nijmegen)

An interviewed asylum seeker shared insights on how people were looking for solutions:

We went with eight people to the city. We walked in the parallel road of Heumensoord, and we got around 20 bags full of clothes and shoes. I put them in my room inside the sleeping compound, and I called many people to come, but after two hours a big tension occurred between one lady from Eritrea and some Syrians. It was a lesson for us to not repeat that anymore. We felt responsible. So ( . . ) we asked the volunteers who want to help by providing goods to make one-to-one connections with the people who need them and to arrange the exchange outside the gates of COA. (Heumensoord resident)

Observing the outcomes of online connections, such as pictures of dinners and thankful messages from people, worked as a motivating engine for group members to get in touch or to offer or ask for the same items.

In the beginning, many residents considered the COA system to be rigid. They were not used to the local Dutch food or the rules and regulations. They did not understand why the Dutch ate bread and cheese both in the morning and at lunch or why they had to do the same. In addition, they saw Dutch doctors as paracetamol providers. They did not know what the task of a general practitioner was, what the difference was between the tasks of the COA (provide shelter, food, and safety) and the IND (responsible for the legal asylum procedure), or what they were allowed or not allowed in these circumstances. The Facebook group was used not only to express complaints about the facilities and life inside the shelter but also to exchange information and to support each other. Some residents tried to show or tell about life inside the camp with pictures and descriptions.

There was a gap between expectations and the local reality. To obtain insights into this gap, asylum seekers used Facebook, posting messages and following members of the Facebook group. Some residents used the Facebook group to find people in the Dutch society with the same profession. From the interviews, it appears that refugees had no idea what to expect during their stay in Heumensoord. As soon as residents discovered the existence of the Facebook group, they used or followed it. Facebook was a tool to easily communicate with the Dutch.
The huge number of group members and the visibility of the outcomes of contact—for both the residents and the locals—caused an increase in interactions between both groups. It even created a base for non-English-speaking asylum seekers to feel safe enough to post messages in their mother tongues. Readers of these messages who did not understand the language could use Google Translate, an online tool for automatic translation, to translate the essence of the message. Residents were also helped by friends of other group members to express their needs. Through social media, then, people’s networks increased and in some cases even led to sustainable social and professional contacts such as friendships and jobs.

Conclusion

In the case of Heumensoord, formal and informal organizations handled communications about the “refugee crisis” in different ways. The Heumensoord shelter was established and worked according to a certain hierarchy using a regime focused on safety in order to control the crisis situation. Here, the COA defends its reputation strategically, through a classical approach of crisis communication. This approach mainly has a strong top-down focus in which protocols are used to direct the behavior of workers and volunteers. At Heumensoord, COA employees’ initiative was initially seen as being harmful to law and order and as something that could potentially create more chaos and conflict. Sent messages, such as paper posters about volunteering or recreational activities in the camp, were not always received by all potential participants or understood by all Heumensoord residents. The Dutch language and customs were also a boundary to cross. Moreover, the way of communication was often top-down and directive: do this, don’t do that. Contact was not made any easier by the COA’s distanced and contained living conditions. In the future, empowerment, under the umbrella of resilience humanitarianism, could help the development of camps as communities and refugees as residents (Irçan & Rygiel, 2015).

Although horizontal relations were quickly established between residents and locals, refugees had limited means and they lacked contact with the Dutch society and knowledge about Dutch activities and customs. Social contact was established through Facebook, and Nijmegen locals invited Heumensoord residents to activities, such as biking lessons, language lessons, and dinners. Facebook groups were used in such a way that the communication was operational and contributed to resilience; they encouraged improvisation and the development of bricolage in relation to contemporary communications, infrastructure, design, and social capital.

Communication through social media—as a weapon of the weak (Scott, 1985) and a tool to fight for social justice (Leurs & Smets, 2018)—was established in response to the daily human needs of the shelter residents and locals from Nijmegen. Through Facebook, both groups could connect, and both operational and resilience-oriented communication were used. Here, we can distinguish operational and resilience-oriented communication patterns that do not come together. When the shelter residents and locals mixed on this platform, openness was slowly created which then created more space for resilience-oriented communication and a mutual way of integration. We can see examples of this in communications in which connections (appointments) and dialogue took place; instead of the top-down approach of one-way integration, a bottom-up way of communication had been discovered. When establishing networks and making connections, a certain focus on resilience is essential. The COA’s challenge, then, was to look for a co-creation in which solutions were sought, but they were only partly successful. If they had developed a cooperation based on connective action, more space could have been made for communication that facilitated resilience in both an operational and strategic manner.

The (semi-)governmental organizations had their designated tasks regarding the residents, but there appeared to be very little flexibility—especially during a crisis situation which required flexibility—to reach over the boundaries of designated tasks in order to meet the necessary, basic demands of individuals. In the gaps between the designated tasks of the formal actors, locals jumped to fulfill the residents’ needs. Sometimes even professionals and residents themselves jumped in, and the (well-managed) social media platform was used as an important way to communicate.

Top-down management approaches for coping with unpredictable events such as a crisis tend to look for control measures. The consequence of control is that bottom-up initiatives, which are often spontaneous and unstructured, are not taken into account. Instead, such interventions are believed to lead to disorder and chaos. However, grassroots initiatives employ social media as a medium to mobilize, activate, and act. Here, the tendency to neglect resilience in cooperation between different kinds of stakeholders shows how the refugee crisis became an institutional policy and crisis that neglected citizens’ initiatives. If, in practice, resilience results in maintaining the status quo of crisis management, adaptation might lead to conflict. Duffield (2016) would call this the perpetuation of the resilience of ruins.

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Notes

1. The difference between a refugee and an asylum seeker is as follows: “A refugee is a person who has fled their own country because they are at risk of serious human rights violations and persecution there. The risks to their safety and life were so great that they felt they had no choice but to leave and seek safety outside their country because their own government cannot or will not protect them from those dangers. (. . .) An asylum seeker is a person who has left their country and is seeking protection from persecution and serious human rights violations in another country, but who hasn’t yet been legally recognized as a refugee and is waiting to receive a decision on their asylum claim” (see https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/refugees/asylum-seekers-and-migrants/).

2. This reference to Hyves, which became a gaming-only platform in 2013, makes clear how far behind and disconnected the Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers (COA) was, at least formally.

3. Here, a status holder is a person with a refugee background, who has obtained a temporary status to stay in the Netherlands (see https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/onezien-diensten/methoden/begrippen/statushouder).

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