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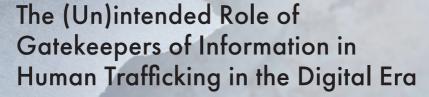## The (Un)intended Role of Gatekeepers of Information in Human Trafficking in the Digital Era

Mirjam van Reisen, Klara Smits, Mia Stokmans & Munyaradzi Mawere

No. 2

Preface

Dear Readers,

from climate change to the predicted developments and possible consequences of artificial intelligence, from asymmetric regional developments to North-South and South-North expectations and perspectives, from security issues to the growing gap between rich and poor: globalised society is increasingly confronted with unusually complex, intertwined and simultaneously arising challenges. These refer to the state and the consequences of constant systemic and individual overload as well as to 'glocal' effects of globalised developments and transformations. Under these circumstances the increasing necessity both to reflect on the emerging structures of development and to assume individual, social and political responsibility becomes clearly evident. Coined under the term 'globalised responsibility' this can be understood as the unmistakable need for the international and transcultural advocacy of strategic transnational problemsolving concepts.

The 23rd Karlsruhe Dialogues "The Responsible Society. Between Challenge and Overload" in 2019 discussed whether and how questions of transparency and responsibility in large and complex transformation processes can be defined, and examined the conditions, effects and challenges of a globalised responsible society. With their contribution, Mirjam van Reisen et al. analysed the conditions relating to the serious increase in human trafficking.

There have been and still are many attempts to find a useful definition of the concept of a responsible society which takes account of the plurality of histories, cultures and their developments. How can we formulate adequately differentiated institutional and individual principles of responsibility? In times of globalisation, we observe discrepancies and dilemmas between the belief that we can build on the ethics of responsibility as a principle of behaviour, while at the same time pointing to the ongoing problems of accountability. We must address the potential pitfalls of naïve trust in our democratic institutional order or the power of evidence-based scientific knowledge and argument to convey alternatives of democratic responsible choice in accordance with universal principles of human rights. Undeniably the international community has failed to address obvious dysfunctions and failures of governance in many areas, thereby giving room for the organised development of human trafficking. In this respect, the knowledge and dissemination of local conditions are of particular relevance.

It is often not easy for us as a community of citizens with diverse cultural, social, political and economic interests and backgrounds to make qualified judgements and decisions in complex environments. Increasingly decisions are subject to uncertainty and unpredictable consequences. Digital platforms and social media influencer as well as the emergence of short-term constellations and events increase the fundamental question of informational transparency and its necessary relationship to responsible decision-making and action. This makes it all the more important to broaden and sharpen our view of the interconnections between local, regional and global developments, societal transformations and their consequences. It becomes increasingly relevant to recognise the dynamics of interactions between the freedom of speech and opinion, evidence-based public science and political space for creative and innovative visions of the future. Finally the capacity, ability and willingness to assume responsibility must be addressed. Sustainable social interest, awareness and engagement as modern citoyens is a prerequisite of meaningful societal responsibility.

In a fast developing environment of multiple new challenges, and due to systemic overload on the one hand and to relative disinterest on the other, short-term commitments tend to overshadow unsolved long-term negative developments. Human trafficking is such an underestimated global reality and demonstrates the growth of well-known unresolved human rights issues. In this second issue of ZAK's publication series ZAK I Occasional Papers, Mirjam van Reisen, Klara Smits, Mia Stokmans and Munyaradzi Mawere will focus on a new form of human trafficking in the context of restricted freedom of access and exchange of information, of an unequally digitally connected world and of monopolised digital architectures owned and ruled by 'gatekeepers of information'.

As a citoyen and scientist citizen I appeal to our global responsibility to be aware, informed and engaged against fulminant breaches of human rights.

Caroline Y. Robertson-von Trotha

Mirjam van Reisen, Klara Smits, Mia Stokmans & Munyaradzi Mawere: The (Un)intended Role of Gatekeepers of Information in Human Trafficking in the Digital Era

In 2008–2009, the connectivity of mobile phones was realised at a global level, although still not accessible everywhere and for everyone (Van Reisen et al. 2018a). Around the same time, a new form of human trafficking emerged in the Sinai Desert of Egypt. Whereas human trafficking was normally linked to the secret extortion of people, this form of human trafficking relied on others knowing what was going on. Vulnerable people who had been displaced from their homes, many of whom were Eritrean refugees, were kidnapped or transported under false pretenses, only to be locked in human trafficking warehouses, where they were tortured. All the human traffickers needed was a mobile phone number of a family member or friend of the victim. They would call these numbers and let the relatives or friends hear the miserable cries of those who were being tortured, with a warning: "Pay us, or they will die!" This new form of human trafficking depends heavily on digitally supported means of communication, especially mobile phones and mobile payments. The simultaneous relation between this new form of human trafficking and the introduction of digital technology has been described (Van Reisen/Rijken 2015; Van Reisen/Mawere 2017; Van Reisen et al. 2018a) but has remained largely unexplained.

The vulnerable and isolated position of the victims is a necessary condition for the modus operandi of the human traffickers. This article will illustrate that this position of the victims is created and perpetuated by the fact that their access to and distribution of information is controlled by other people – gatekeepers of information. This article identifies this role in a new light, in the context of an uneven digitally connected world. The uneven access to and distribution of information, which is intensified by digitally connected architecture, produces 'gatekeepers in the digital architecture' who dictate what information victims receive and what information others receive about them. It has already been noted that digital technology plays a key role in the modus operandi of human traffickers seeking ransom payments, where traffickers are free to exchange information, track and target vulnerable refugees, and remain anonymous (DSP-Groep/Tilburg University 2016; Van Reisen/Mawere 2017). This article investigates the role of these controllers of information, the gatekeepers in the digital architecture, by looking at the human trafficking of Eritrean refugees for ransom. This article focuses on Eritreans because Eritrea is an extremely closed country, on the bottom of the ranking of free access to information and open communication (Reporters Without Borders 2019), and simultaneously produces a large number of victims of human trafficking relative to other countries (Van Reisen/Mawere 2017). It is also the case that Eritrea has a monopolised digital architecture, owned by the country's sole ruling party.

The main goals of this article are to explore the mediating role of gatekeepers regarding information needed by Eritrean refugees, how this mediating role is intertwined with human trafficking, and how the digitalisation of communication has further influence on this situation. Answers to these questions help us understand new forms of human trafficking that are victimising Eritrean refugees, so that more effective policies can be suggested to stop this tragedy. As a case study, this article explores the 'gate-keeping' in the lives of Eritreans during the trajectories of human trafficking that have been formed in the last decade.

Access to and distribution of information: black holes and gatekeepers

Open communication or open access to and distribution of information is related to the term 'social capital'. Social capital defines the cohesion of society and its ability to function through shared values and connections (Field 2008). Social capital relies on the flow of information between people and is therefore related to open communication. *Structural holes* exist where the connections between groups are weak – however, information brokers can facilitate the flow of information across such structural holes, effectively controlling the information flows (Burt 2000) and negatively regulating the access to open communication of those people involved. In the current digital era, social connections and information exchange are governed by the spread of digital technology in information exchange. This has created a "network society" (Van Dijk 2006), which unfortunately for many is controlled by gatekeepers of digital architecture. Castells (2000), in his three-volume "The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture", argues that digital technology has created a new social network in which information processing has become the core activity of capitalism, with little or no participation by other actors in society. Within this digital social network, *structural holes* exist in which people are not connected to the rest of the world. Castells calls these the "black holes" of informational capitalism. In other words, the network society creates locations where the exchange of specific information proliferates, but where other contents and also locations are left out. This inequality between people can be described in terms of individuals' capabilities to access and distribute information that is relevant for them.

What is the African situation regarding such black holes? In most parts of Africa, people do not have much say over their digital infrastructure, because information is disseminated and data is mined according to Eurocentric norms, which Williams (2017) calls "digital imperialism". As Van Reisen et al. (2019) show, the structure of the digital architecture bears close resemblance to the architecture of the information society created during the colonial era. In the colonial era, during the 16th and 17th centuries, specific routes (networks) and connection points (nodes) came into existence in which information was collected by the European colonisers and analysed and transformed into general knowledge which suited the European trade. This knowledge turned into

power – the people that were colonised and enslaved could not access this knowledge, nor use the networks and nodes. Van Reisen et al. (2019) show that these 16th and 17th century infrastructures are the foundation for modern-day digital infrastructure. Old colonial shipping routes and modern-day routes of the internet, its cable networks and structure of trajectories and nodes, bear a close resemblance to one another, and to the Eurocentric collecting and handling of digital data. In consequence, many African people do not have access to digital infrastructure, and if they do have access the information provided is predominantly Eurocentric.

This scenario brings us back to the critical role of gatekeepers as information brokers who play a crucial role in social capital by bridging the *black holes* just described. In the black holes emerging within the digital architecture, those who have access to digital networks can become powerful information brokers – the *gatekeepers* – who control the information flows within and across the black holes. The concept of gatekeepers has most often been used to describe an agent who filters information, cutting it down, and selecting and formulating (presumed relevant) messages that reach the *gated*, the ones who receive the filtered information (Barzilai-Nahon 2008). The prime example of gatekeepers often given is that of media practitioners, who carefully select, filter and edit information, thus deciding what reaches the eyes and ears of the public (Shoemaker et al. 2009). Others have defined gatekeepers as go-betweens for different groups, for example, in company settings (Tushman/Katz 1980). Through rapid evolution in digital technology, the traditional roles of gatekeepers have changed. Agents, such as data aggregation services and digital intermediaries, have been proposed as the new gate-keepers. They produce information that is made available through a range of sources online (Ferreira 2018).

However, all these descriptions focus on gatekeepers as senders of specific information to specific *gated* and disregard the role of gatekeepers as middlemen in open communication. If gatekeepers are regarded as middlemen, then the information that the *gated* intend to send to other members of society is also selected, filtered and edited by the middlemen before it can reach those other people. In the context of black holes in the digital architecture, information gatekeepers are middlemen and dictate both the information that people in black holes can *access* and the information that they can *disseminate*. Gatekeepers in black holes not only filter, select and edit information, but also have control over the opportunities to access (digital) information channels. This is clearly visible in the context of human trafficking for ransom in Africa, where the access to digital technology as well as the access to and the distribution of information are limited, so that human traffickers are accorded the roles of very powerful gatekeepers.

In order to look at the interaction between the *gatekeepers* and the *gated*, this article investigates this in the context of human trafficking of Eritrean refugees. In the phenomenon that has been labelled 'Sinai Trafficking', a new form of human trafficking

for ransom that was found and described, the digital phone played a unique role, and researchers have found that up to 95 percent of the victims were of Eritrean origin (Van Reisen et al. 2012; Van Reisen/Mawere 2017). Moreover, a large group of refugees who are currently being held in Libya as victims of human trafficking are of Eritrean origin, and many were abducted for ransom. Eritrean refugees therefore appear to be extremely vulnerable to human trafficking in this digital era, and provide an extreme case to illustrate the role of gatekeepers in the digital era. The research question to be answered in this case study is how gatekeepers mediate the information needed by Eritrean refugees, how this mediating role is intertwined with human trafficking, and how the digitalisation of communication has further influence on this situation.

Research methodology

This article investigates the role of gatekeepers of information in human trafficking in the digital context. This investigation is carried out through a case study which focuses on Eritrean refugees. The study is based on a review of reports and communication with resource persons and victims of human trafficking. Communication with informants was established in focus group meetings and in interviews – including through social media. It included information received by frequent contact through social media using in-depth written engagement of persons held in human trafficking situations. Information was cross-checked with other experts in the area. Furthermore, pictures and other visual materials were collected to verify the information obtained. Cross-checking was used to achieve an acceptable level of trustworthiness, proportionate to the extremely difficult areas of research (including personal danger to the informants).

The data collection relates to the period 2018–2019. The respondents and informants were of Eritrean origin and were residing either in Europe or in North Africa, especially Libya. Detailed information was obtained from one of the camps in Libya where refugees from Eritrea were held. The interviews were carried out by the first and second author of this article. For reasons of safety and security, the names of the resource persons have been withheld to maintain their anonymity.

Results: the mediating role of gatekeepers

In order to describe the mediating role of gatekeepers, we use the theoretical framework on network gatekeeping proposed by Barzilai-Nahon (2008). Barzilai-Nahon states that the dynamics of the gatekeeper-gated relationship rely on four factors: 1) the autonomy and *alternative information sources available* to the gated; 2) the ability of the gated *to produce and distribute information* freely; 3) the *relationship* between the gated and the gatekeeper, which is generally indirect and short-lived in nature, and

which is in contrast to direct and enduring relations, which would potentially be able to produce a platform of negotiation between the gated and the gatekeeper; and 4) the *political power* involved in the gated-gatekeeper relation. We will describe the relation between the gated and the gatekeeper along these lines.

The autonomy and alternative information sources available to the gated

In Eritrea, the vast majority of information comes from state media, relatives abroad – although this communication is restricted by the risk of surveillance, as will be explained later –, satellite radio and gatekeepers within the country, including those involved in human trafficking networks. Digital information plays only a meager role as an information source, since Eritrea is a black hole in the current digital landscape. The World Bank estimated that in 2017, only 1.309 percent of the Eritrean population had access to the internet (World Bank n.d.). Internet cafés are available in places such as the capital, Asmara, but access to the internet there is implicitly restricted since people know that the government might be 'watching', thereby reducing most Eritreans to the status of citizens in black holes.

Mobile services are dominated by a single provider, Eritel. However, access to sim cards is severely restricted and only available to those with an ID card, and most of the country's youths are not able to get an ID. Moreover, in order to get a sim card in Eritrea, a customer needs clearance from authorities managing the national service (written communication from R. to first author, email, 24 May 2019). The majority of Eritrea's working population are assigned to national service, which is open-ended in time, and which includes conditions of forced labour (Kibreab 2017). This has been labelled modern-day enslavement (OHCHR 2015).

The reality of this is described by a refugee, originally from Eritrea but now residing in the Netherlands. In a testimony, he states that he was forced to work without a salary in construction from 2002–2015, after which time he fled. If he failed to obey the orders of the military commanders he was put in prison, which happened twice. As the situation worsened over the years and he tried to escape, he had hardly any access to communication or information:

"We cannot phone. The landlines are controlled, and we cannot speak freely. We cannot give any information. We don't say anything. We speak only in code. We are not allowed to have a sim card. It was not possible to communicate to explain the severity of our situation". (Interview face-to-face MvR with D., 26 May 2019)

At the time of writing, it is still the case that people working on road construction in Eritrea are assigned under the national service and that they are not allowed to have a phone or sim card.

Due to this situation, the Eritrean population relies on a very limited number of sources for the information they need. A select few may be able to circumvent the surveillance and blocking of social media via Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), but even then the internet speed is so slow that a single message may take minutes or even longer to send.

Those fleeing Eritrea do so to escape repression, especially the indefinite period of national service (Melicherová 2019), and rely heavily on gatekeepers of information, often smugglers or traffickers (Van Reisen/Mawere 2017). The information provided by gatekeepers opens up the only opportunity to escape from repression. Therefore, those gatekeepers are often hailed as 'saviours', and parents tell their children who want to flee to trust them and to do whatever they say (Van Reisen/Mawere 2017).

Most Eritrean refugees own a smart phone, which is their most prized possession as it allows them to keep in touch with family and to find information on their destination (Bariagaber 2013). Kidane (2016) demonstrated the reliance of refugee communities on social media for information and found that relatives are their most trusted source of information. However, along the migration route, technological barriers restrict the use of mobile phones as tools of communication. In research done in one of Ethiopia's refugee camps, it was revealed that access to the digital network (which allows the refugees to communicate with people outside the camp) is very restricted (Schoenmaeckers 2018). The research showed that the young refugees had to employ all sorts of tricks to get even the faintest signal needed in order to send a message to their friends and family members, as connectivity in the camp was very poor. Person-to-person contact in the camps was regarded to be the most important way of sharing information.

In this context, the refugees have very limited access to digital networks to send and receive information and easily fall prey to gatekeepers who are often facilitators of human trafficking organisations. From interviews, the image emerges that recruiters from the human trafficking organisations are never far away, with easy-to-find contacts who can tell you who to turn to.

Looking at the alternatives available to Eritrean refugees to obtain information from various sources, this paper has already established that those refugees often live in black holes and thus cannot freely access information. Research has shown that although attempts are being made to better inform refugees about the risks of migration, these attempts are not effective; internet access is often very limited and the refugees frequently

rely on their close social networks for information (Van Reisen et al. 2018b). In addition, camp officials, who refugees may turn to for information (Schoenmaeckers 2018) or assistance, are often unaware of official migration procedures or are not capable of making them available to the refugee.

The extremely limited ability of the gated to produce and distribute information freely

In Eritrea, it is not only very difficult to obtain a sim card and to obtain access to a mobile phone, but also no free press is available and the limited access to social media is restricted when there is any risk of a protest occurring (AfricaNews 2019). In consequence, the ability of the gated to produce and distribute information freely is largely restricted. Even if people do have access to a mobile phone or social media, it is very unsafe to send information (Interview MvR with M., May 2019; Interview MvR with A., WhatsApp, 12 May 2019). All outgoing phone and internet communications are closely monitored. In 2015, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea found the following:

"The Commission collected a body of testimony that indicates the existence of a complex and multi-layered system to conduct surveillance of and spying on the Eritrean population, both within and outside the country, with the ultimate purpose of controlling it. Information collected through this system is then used to take actions aimed at instilling fear in people and maintaining a state of control leading to arbitrariness that paralyses them: arbitrary arrests, unjustified detentions, torture, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, etc [...]". (OHCHR 2015: 91)

Thus, Eritreans (the gated) have a very limited ability to produce and distribute information freely. This is also indicated by informants who worked on road construction projects in Eritrea. When asked whether or not they could send information, pictures or videos to explain their situation, informants responded that this was not allowed and could put them in great danger (Interview face-to-face MvR with M., 12, 26 May 2019; Interview phone MvR with A., WhatsApp, 12 May 2019).

Those fleeing Eritrea are often situated in digital black holes with limited or no connectivity. This greatly restricts their information-distributing ability. In limited ways, refugees trapped in situations of human trafficking and detention in Libya attempt to contact many people, including journalists and international organisations, through their mobile phones in order to call for help (Sunderland 2019). Using phones in these circumstances to disseminate information may carry a great risk if it is not done on the conditions of the human traffickers (Interview MvR with Z., April/May 2019). Refugees may face severe consequences, such as beatings and torture, over the secret use of their phones, and many have their phones taken away from them by force (Smits 2019). Even in Libya's

official detention centres, where horrific abuses also take place, demonstrations are rare and few pictures make it out (France24 2018). The limited information production and distribution ability has not, to date, resulted in the desirable protection or evacuation of victims from danger, such as could be expected under international standards. The situation remains largely unknown to the public at large (Conversations MvR with students, May 2019).

Often, at the start of their journey, refugees are asked for a crucial piece of information by the people that they consider their smugglers at the time. This is a phone number of a friend or relative and often a name and address as well (Van Reisen/Mawere 2017). Friends and/or relatives are contacted by the human traffickers to arrange the payment for their trip. Some refugees enter in no-fee migration deals which later turn out to be situations of trafficking for ransom. Even if the refugee has the availability of sufficient funds to pay (usually obtained from relatives), this is not carried in cash, and family in Eritrea or friends in refugee camps or cities are required to arrange the payment on their behalf when they have arrived at their intended destination (Van Reisen et al. 2018a). This illustrates that the different parts of human trafficking organisations cooperate with one another and that the refugee is passed on from one group of people to another, all of whom perhaps belong to the same overarching organisation. Within such umbrella organisations, there are those who play the role of coordinators – for example, the notorious General Teklai Manjus, who played a critical role in coordinating cross-border smuggling from Eritrea during Sinai trafficking operations (ibid.). Other names consistently recur in the conversations with witnesses of human trafficking (Van Reisen/ Mawere 2017).

Much of the information that the refugees produce during their migration is closely controlled and disseminated by the human traffickers to specific audiences. This mainly includes phone calls to relatives or friends who are forced to listen to their loved ones being tortured in order to make them pay vast amounts in ransom (Van Reisen et al. 2012). New methods to extract ransom have included other digital tools which keep up with the progress of technology, including embarrassing pictures disseminated on Facebook (Hayden 2019) and heart-breaking videos sent to family (CNN 2018) on messenger, Imo or WhatsApp. Whereas in the Sinai desert, family and friends of victims were forced to listen to audio files, this has now progressed to videos that are published on social media (ibid.). This involuntary spread of information may lead to the freedom of individual refugees, when their ransom has been paid – often multiple times – but it also leads to ever higher ransoms and increasing numbers of victims. Desperate families have turned to social media and fundraising platforms to collect money. The horrific images of torture are used to crowdfund ransom payments (Hayden 2019). This shows that digital technology provides opportunities for human traffickers to change their modus operandi with regard to the distribution of information about victims.

The sounds and pictures of torture invoke feelings of shame. Indications of wide-spread sexual violence suggest that the shaming of victims is part of a deliberate strategy to disempower the victims of human trafficking for ransom (Interview MvR with Z., March–May 2019). Images sent by the refugees as well as those disseminated by the human traffickers are distributed within the Eritrean community across social media networks. Through the deliberate and involuntary spread of this disempowering information, not only the victims are traumatised, but also their friends, family and wider communities. This, in combination with the crippling amounts of ransom that members of the Eritrean community have often been forced to pay, has led to a situation where the community is experiencing collective trauma (Van Reisen/Kidane 2017). This traumatisation results in ever-increasing profits from human trafficking-related situations affecting the community. It may also restrict the ability to expose the practices of human traffickers beyond the Eritrean community.

The relationship between the gated and the gatekeeper

Direct and enduring relations can produce a platform of negotiation between the gated and the gatekeeper. However, the victims of human trafficking rarely have a face-to-face encounter with the persons at the top of the organisation, i.e., the ones managing the operations. The crossing from Eritrea to Sudan or Ethiopia may have been facilitated by someone the refugee knows, or who is introduced by a trusted person, but those in charge of transport, accommodation and food, or those who execute the extortion of ransom and perform torture, are many different people from different places and different nationalities. The collection of payments and ransom money is done anonymously, to avoid tracing the payments. Digital technology further facilitates this anonymity.

Gatekeepers with no bad intentions, smugglers, or mediators cooperating with the traffickers often use code names, for example, and use multiple sim cards from providers such as Lebara or Lycamobile that do not need to be registered (Van Reisen et al. 2018a). If friends or relatives are making the payment – which can be anywhere in the world – they are simply told where to leave the money, and then they leave it there. A refugee held in Libya explains how the money is paid in the following WhatsApp conversation, which we have not edited in any way:

"Z: When to enter libya sumglers then to paid by the role of the chief

M: Who is the chief?

Z: My chief in B and W

M: And how you pay the chief? In Dubai? In Sudan?

Z: 7500 is all in Dubai

Z: 3500 in Sudan

M: 7500 in Dubai - you pay it to bank?

Z: They give only number telephone for Dubai. Then to call by any way in dubai. Then to pay". (Conversation MvR with Z., WhatsApp, 16 February 2019)

After the money has been paid through several channels – usually by relatives –, numbers (codes) are communicated by those holding the refugees captive to initiate their release or next transport, although refugees may also be released and sold on to new traffickers who may again extort them for ransom.

A veil of anonymity regarding those in charge of trafficking and of payments is used to undermine a direct and enduring relationship that could produce a platform of negotiation between the gated and the gatekeeper. In the process, this creates further power differentials and dynamics in the relationship between the traffickers and the refugees. Many victims of trafficking only hear the name of their top-level trafficker in passing, and even that is usually only the first name or a nickname. They are not offered a platform for negotiation and are therefore completely dependent on what the trafficker wants from them. Treated as commodities, the refugees are often sold from one trafficker to the next. Even so, witnesses may be reluctant to give names for fear of reprisals, even if they are in an extremely difficult situation or being held in very poor conditions.

The smugglers and traffickers work together, keeping in touch via digital technology, to exchange information on refugee movements and to understand which refugees may be particularly vulnerable. This exchange is kept secret from the refugees, and when a group guided by a human smuggler is intercepted by human traffickers, the smugglers often maintain their innocence in order to protect their reputation – whereas in fact, they may have orchestrated the interception and have profited from it (Van Reisen et al. 2018a). The refugees will remember the smugglers as trusted gatekeepers of information and services. They may communicate the name of the trusted smuggler to family and friends, but may be more reluctant to provide information about this part of the human trafficking infrastructure to legal agents.

Political power

Looking at the political power (or lack thereof) of the Eritrean refugees in relation to that of their Eritrean traffickers reveals a fairly straightforward first difference. The UN Refugee Agency's (UNHCR) eligibility guidelines from 2011, which are still in place today, outline clear profiles of Eritrean refugees in need of international protection

(UNHCR 2011). The UNHCR specifies that it is not safe for Eritrean refugees to return to their country, whether through forced or voluntary returns, as repression structures are still in place in Eritrea. Political power in Eritrea is centralised in the hands of the President, Isaias Afwerki, and there are no opposition parties, no constitution, no parliament and no independent judiciary in the country (Plaut 2017). Eritrea thus is a one-party state, and Eritreans cannot vote.

Without free press, people within the country cannot express themselves in any meaningful way. Outside the country, even as far afield as Europe, Eritrean refugees cannot count on the support of the Eritrean embassy, which has been implicated in human trafficking (Van Reisen/Mawere 2017) and in threats, violence and extortion of the Eritrean diaspora – in order to collect the 2 percent diaspora tax, among other things (DSP-Groep/Tilburg University 2017). From these standing observations, it becomes clear that both within and outside of the country, Eritrean refugees cannot count on the support of their government. What is more, within the international political arena, refugees exist in what Peter Nyers (2006: xiii) calls a "depoliticized humanitarian space", or a state of exception. Within the international arena, which is based largely on the concept of sovereignty, the refugee does not fit in.

The human traffickers, on the other hand, enjoy a position of power through their wealth. Research has shown that organisations facilitating the smuggling and trafficking of Eritreans have their roots in Eritrea (Van Reisen/Mawere 2017). The people in control of the human trafficking of Eritreans are Eritrean themselves, and those at the top of the regime benefit from these operations and do nothing to stop them (Focus group MvR, 28 March 2019). Outside of Eritrea, the human traffickers have been recorded as working in close cooperation with state actors such as Sudanese police officials, Sudanese security and intelligence branches, and Libyan military and non-state militia. This network gives them solid political relations and protection.

The political power of the human traffickers and smugglers in the region is confirmed by their use of digital technology to gather intelligence, to facilitate negotiations and transactions, and to coordinate with local authorities. They also exchange information on what routes are safe and whether any law enforcement may pose a threat to their operations, and they use GPS to determine what routes to take (Van Reisen et al. 2018a). The traffickers can freely travel in and out of Eritrea, apparently without fear of persecution by the government, as opposed to the refugees they victimise (Sahan Foundation/IGAD Security Sector Program (ISSP) 2016). Although they operate in an illegal space, the prosecution of human traffickers has been very limited in the specific context of human trafficking for ransom in Africa, and has even ended with the refugees themselves being victimised – as well as the humanitarian organisations seeking to assist them (Bulman 2019; Tondo 2019). Indeed, government officials all the way up

to the highest levels are heavily involved in profiting from smuggling people out of the country, and have been implicated in collaborating with international human trafficking organisations (Van Reisen & Mawere 2017).

Due to this political power, human trafficking organisations can induce refugees to do things they may otherwise not have done, through information control. Promoting themselves as the only way to safety, the human traffickers take advantage of people's desperation and draw people into their networks. This includes taking the dangerous route over the Mediterranean Sea, despite its extreme risks, as well as accepting to be sent back to Eritrea in 'voluntary' returns, equally knowing the risks of this. Although refugees are often aware of the risks, they experience high levels of trauma, which puts them in a hyper-vigilant state (Stokmans/Kidane 2018). The decision to go along with the human traffickers appears to be instigated by a combination of fear, desperation and manipulation of information (Kidane/Van Reisen 2017; Interview MvR with Z., WhatsApp, April/May 2019).

The fear-inducing power of the human trafficker over the refugee is very real, as is apparent from this message received from Libya by an Eritrean refugee held in captivity there since 2017, who reported information on the circumstances:

"Pls remove my life first from Libya because when they know this information they can kill me". (Conversation MvR with Z., WhatsApp, 14 February 2019)

Constantly changing sim cards and phone numbers, this refugee is still finding ways of sending information out, but the fear is always there, urging them to request that all information be immediately deleted once received:

"Pls take to your phone this message because every time I will make delete after you put in your phone because I am afraid always". (Conversation MvR with Z., WhatsApp, 15 February 2019)

Refugees may operate with a foreign sim card, given that no access can be obtained through the Libyan communication system, since as a refugee they are held in captivity (and depend on guards for any contact with the outside world). Z. explains how he set up a French social media number, from captivity in Libya, and why this was necessary:

"My best friend stays in France. (..) I asked him to help me with WhatsApp & Imo through his number so he download it for me. Because here in Libya any sim card you have you need to buy first but then you have to come with ID CARD. Me, I don't have ID card so the only question is how to solve. How to open way of information. Sim card in Libya, you can buy from these Arab but after a short time also the man who sold it to you he can close it. How to open the way of information?" (Conversation MvR with Z., WhatsApp, 15 February 2019)

The experiences described show the level of fear evoked in the process of trying to open communication channels and provide information about their situation, but also the difficulties experienced to overcome the gatekeeper that stops them from communicating freely about their situation. This has enormous consequences. Most refugees do not exist in the digital world, and therefore there is little if any understanding about their situation. They literally live in a black hole in the digital architecture and depend entirely on gatekeepers who may or may not help them get information out. This creates extremely skewed power relations and a situation of acute dependency.

This dependency of Eritrean refugees on human traffickers can be further illustrated by paying attention to the migration alternatives they have. This will be the topic of the next section.

The dependence of Eritrean refugees on human traffickers

The results suggest that Eritrean refugees have no choice but to go along with human traffickers to migrate to Europe. This dependency will be illustrated by examining the alternatives of migration Eritreans have and understanding their autonomy in deciding on such alternatives. This will be discussed by paying attention to: 1) alternatives to migration to Europe; 2) alternative migration routes or options; and 3) the autonomy to choose human smugglers and traffickers. This is important as it shows the range of alternatives available to refugees and the power smugglers and traffickers have to make them victims of human trafficking.

Alternatives to migration to Europe

Starting with alternatives to migration to Europe, several can be thought of, including settling in the region or staying in refugee camps there. It should be emphasized that most in fact do take this option. For example, as of August 2018, UNHCR reports that over 170,000 refugees are residing in Ethiopia's refugee camps (UNHCR n.d.). This number does not include those who have settled directly in cities and towns. Ethiopia's new refugee proclamation, adopted in February 2019, makes it possible for refugees to work and move outside of the refugee camps, facilitating better integration (Ethiopian Government 2019). Other countries which host Eritreans include Sudan, Uganda, Israel and Kenya. Uganda in particular has received recognition, recently being named in a resolution of the Pan-African Parliament as an example of refugee hospitality, a place where refugees are integrated into host communities as much as possible (Daily Monitor 2019).

However, the option of 'not migrating' is hindered by barriers to settling, which include lack of safety, lack of basic needs provisions in refugee camps, and lack of livelihood opportunities (Van Reisen et al. 2018b). Officials from Uganda, which hosts nearly 1.4 million refugees, note that especially as the amount of refugees increases, it is a challenge to provide sufficient basic needs, security and integration opportunities (Malole 2018). Similarly, officials from Ethiopia have expressed their concerns about the inadequate conditions in the refugee camps in the northern region of the country (Gebreyesus/Schoenmaeckers 2019; Melicherová 2019). One of these Ethiopian officials explains the inadequacy of the services available to deal with the large number of refugees arriving from Eritrea:

"The border situation hasn't been any change the Eritrean asylum seekers number per day is 250 individuals. From this total 25 percent are Unaccompanied and Separated Minors. The Eritrean government start to kidnap the children to go to SAWA military training. That is why they are coming. Regarding the registration situation more than 1000 individuals are staying very day. The services in all camps are inadequate". (Message received from T., 1 May 2019)

Sometimes refugees have no free choice as they are kidnapped and abducted and end up in human trafficking situations (Van Reisen 2012; Van Reisen/Mawere 2017). This relates especially, but not exclusively, to vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied minors and young women and men.

Alternative migration routes or options

A look at alternative migration routes reveals that the options available are limited. Migration routes to other places do exist: Although the focus of European researchers is often on the routes to Europe, Eritrean refugees also migrate and are trafficked along southern (towards South Africa) and eastern (towards the Middle East) routes. Although deaths along these routes have been less publicized, they carry equally high risks (Gebre-Egziabher 2018).

Other alternatives are so-called regular migration pathways. Eritrean refugees with family members already in Europe may qualify for family reunification. However, two main barriers to this are that the refugees need to reach Europe first, and that they often face insurmountable bureaucratic hurdles and may be forced to go to Eritrean embassies to get the necessary documentation, which many refuse to provide (DSP-Groep/Tilburg University 2016). Other legal pathways are basically nonexistent. The European Parliament recently asked for humanitarian visas to be made available through the new EU visa code, but this was rejected by the European Council and Commission (European Parliament 2018).

The autonomy to choose human smugglers and traffickers

The final point of analysis is the consideration of the alternatives available to refugees to pick and choose human traffickers and smugglers. With the traffickers and smugglers operating under the veil of anonymity, refugees generally do not have any alternatives available: What appears to be a choice may only be a pretense. Refugees often have control of their mobility only up to a certain point, for example, by withholding payment until their safe arrival at the agreed point. Smuggling often becomes trafficking when the refugees arrive in a situation of lawlessness, such as in Libya. The decision-making ability of refugees is denied as a result of captivity (and the resulting lack of open communication), a lack of food and other basic necessities – including access to health care – and the fact that they are frequently subject to torture, physical abuse and sexual violence. They are no longer in control of their lives. In the worst cases, the refugee's family is not able to raise the money for ransom, and they are left without any leverage to negotiate with those holding them. In such cases, the only option remaining is to obey instructions to carry out tasks that support the human trafficking operations, including tasks such as contacting people who are willing to migrate, translation, transportation, and even the carrying out of torture, (sexual) violence and extortion.

Conclusion

The digital architecture produces 'black holes', i.e., places which are unconnected or hardly connected. The emergence of 'black holes' in this digital architecture bears a strong resemblance to the colonial information society, with a flow of information from unconnected places to super-connected places in Europe. The digital architecture and the advances made in digital communication tools and connected information have increased the divide between those who are connected to the digital world – and who can make full use of it –, and those who are not. This creates a new role for those who facilitate information between connected places and people in the isolated 'black holes': gatekeepers of information. Gatekeepers bridge the in- and outflows of information from the isolated communities of the gated; they therefore have the power to control the information streams. This article has set out to explore the mediating role of gatekeepers regarding information needed by Eritrean refugees, how this mediating role is intertwined with human trafficking, and how the digitalisation of communication has further influence on this situation.

Previous research indicated that many Eritrean refugees are victims of a new form of human trafficking which makes much use of all kinds of digital tools, particularly information and money flows and GPS devices. As the modi operandi of human traffickers evolve with the introduction of new generations of technology, it appears that digitalisation is providing extra opportunities to the human trafficking business. These digital innovations, however, are not available for the Eritrean refugees due to stark differences in connectivity and in terms of access to digital services. When an Eritrean refugee is a victim of human trafficking, the traffickers control the information stream between the refugee and his/her social network. The traffickers are gatekeepers of information who have total control over the information stream. However, a lot is still unclear about the relation between the gatekeepers of information and the Eritrean refugees (the gated). For example, which gatekeepers introduce Eritrean refugees into the network of human traffickers, and how does the relationship between gatekeepers and the gated evolve such that the gatekeeper enjoys total control over the gated?

This phenomenon was investigated by studying the situation of Eritrean refugees through the theoretical framework of network gatekeeping proposed by Barzilai-Nahon (2008). This paper assessed four factors to look at the extent to which the Eritrean refugees are dependent on gatekeepers of information. The first factor regards alternatives available to the refugees to obtain information about migration options. This research has shown that Eritrean refugees are trapped in black holes within the digital infrastructure. Moreover, the Eritrean government controls all the media as well as information flows. This considerably restricts free access to information about migration options. The information about opportunities to migrate to Europe, for example, is provided by trusted middlemen who are connected to smugglers. This research indicates that the trafficking of Eritrean refugees is facilitated through social networks that are controlled by Eritreans and that have their roots in Eritrea. When human rights abuses in Eritrea cause someone to flee, they rely on information provided by these smugglers who have ties to human traffickers.

The second factor is the ability of the gated to produce and distribute information. This research indicates that in Eritrea, information streams are under the full control of the government. It is very difficult to get a sim card, and citizens face severe consequences for any unauthorised use of their phones. In consequence, the ability of Eritreans to produce and distribute any information about migration to Europe to family or friends is severely restricted. If the refugees are on the move, they are probably under the control of human traffickers, who have full control of the *information production* and distribution of the refugees. Although most victims have a mobile phone and are able to obtain access to services such as social media, despite low connectivity, the tool they use for communication becomes a tool of extortion. This paper argues that Eritrean refugees are forced into the role of passive *gated*, whereas human traffickers assume complete control of information and act as the *gatekeepers*. The images and communications that do come out, and that are shared freely across social media, are facilitated by the human traffickers. These are often horrific images and sounds of torture that are made to extort ransom from refugees. This traumatises the victims, as well as society as a whole, which resorts to incurring debt and to crowdfunding to collect the money to pay for release of their fellow victims.

The modus operandi of the human traffickers is such that no enduring relationship between the gatekeeper and the gated will ever be established (the third factor). Such an enduring relationship could provide an opportunity for negotiation. However, victims of human trafficking are handled as commodities who are passed on to different people, all of whom remain anonymous. In consequence, the *relationship* between the human traffickers and the refugees is indirect and veiled in anonymity, ensuring that no platform of negotiation is possible. The top-level traffickers remain safely hidden backstage. This is a basis for very uneven power relations between anonymous but powerful human traffickers and their victims, ranging from Eritrea to Europe.

The research shows that Eritrean refugees have no *political power*, either before or after they flee. In fact, the human traffickers hold more political power through their wealth and ability to operate in lawless areas, as well as through their cooperation with state actors involved in the human trafficking networks. Through the control of information, they are able to force the refugees to enter into their world. The absolute control the gatekeepers of information have in new forms of human trafficking gives them an almost untouchable position. This facilitates the human trafficking trade, and protects human trafficking organisations. Moreover, it disrupts anti-trafficking policy initiatives by providing misleading information, since virtually all of the information is controlled by gatekeepers.

With each of the factors discussed in this essay, it has been shown that in the gatekeeper-gated relationship, the gated have very little control over information flows in any part of the migration process. This goes against the push-and-pull model of migration, which underlies many of the policies implemented by the European Union to stop irregular migration. This theory assumes that refugees make calculated decisions, weighing the pros and cons of migrating towards Europe, and that the only reason they take such high risks is that sufficient information on those risks is lacking (Van Reisen et al. 2018b). This paper, however, shows that information is tightly controlled by the human traffickers acting in their capacity as gatekeepers, and that any factors that may provide agency to the refugees as the *gated* are lacking.

The policy implication of this is that human traffickers should be regarded as central actors in the migration decisions of refugees, and that those decisions are not freely made. Information control by gatekeepers is used to force refugees into lucrative human trafficking situations to extort ransom. One approach to changing this dynamic is to create an internationally recognised policy that gives the *gated* or the refugees more agency and political power by increasing their ability to produce and distribute information freely. In that way, the business model of human traffickers would be tackled head-on, since it is based on gated information and the creation of black holes in which people become entirely dependent on the information provided by gatekeepers who are intertwined with the trafficking networks.

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Link to two recently published books *Mobile Africa: Human Trafficking and the Digital Divide* and *Roaming Africa: Migration, Resilience and Social Protection* (published by Langaa RPCIG (Cameroon); edited by Mirjam van Reisen, et al.): https://www.eepa. be/?page_id=340

About the Editor

Caroline Y. Robertson-von Trotha is founding director of the ZAK | Centre for Cultural and General Studies at the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT) in Germany, and professor of Sociology and Cultural Studies. Her research interests include cultural change and globalisation, internationalisation and integration, foreign cultural and educational policy, and the theory and practice of public science. She is coordinator of the German network of the Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF), member of the Culture Committee of the German UNESCO Commission and chairwoman of the Academic Council for Culture and Foreign Policy (WIKA) at the ifa (Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations, Stuttgart/Berlin), and member of its advisory board. She is also a member of the advisory council of the Institute for Cultural Policy of the Association of Cultural Policy in Bonn and spokeswoman of the scientific committee ("Kleiner Konvent") of the Schader Foundation in Darmstadt. Caroline Y. Robertson-von Trotha is the editor of numerous academic books and publication series. She is initiator and scientific convenor of a variety of teaching formats and public science events, including the Karlsruhe Dialogues, an annual international symposium on current socio-cultural issues.

About the Karlsruhe Dialogues

Link to the lecture of Mirjam van Reisen at the Karlsruhe Dialogues 2019 (ZAKVideoclips): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3wp4D_4d2w&list=PL0Tm-H52ybqId1psWTRKPAM71ut7btC-v-&index=8

The Karlsruhe Dialogues, initiated in 1997 by Hermann Glaser and Caroline Y. Robertson-von Trotha, are an annual three-day symposium, which highlights current topics and challenges of socio-political and cultural relevance. The concept of the Karlsruhe Dialogues is unique in that it combines discursive-reflective ways of exploring a topic (keynote lectures, discussions, panel discussions, roundtables with international experts) with aesthetic-artistic approaches (readings, concerts, thematic film nights, theatre plays) within an international, intercultural, and interdisciplinary framework. Developing a comprehensive concept of public science, complex topics relevant to society as a whole are thus presented to a broad audience in order to promote critical dialogue as a constitutive element of open access and public understanding of science. The interdisciplinary exchange between the fields of culture, economy, media and science are a central concern. In order to ensure a broad resonance and participatory basis for the Karlsruhe Dialogues, the ZAK cooperates with institutional partners who contribute to the event. These include amongst others the Badische Staatstheater, the Center for Art and Media (ZKM Karlsruhe), the Schauburg Cinema and ARTE Deutschland, which bring together various public arenas.

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The ZAK | Occasional Papers bring together contributions from the scholarly and scientific environment of the ZAK | Centre for Cultural and General Studies at the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT). These papers negotiate topics of globalisation, inter- and transculturality, diversity, and social change. Their approach corresponds to the Centre's understanding of itself in its mission to connect research, teaching and public science: implementing a transdisciplinary orientation, they incorporate working papers and results from outside of traditional scholarly approaches. They aim at an intercultural and international focus. The ZAK | Occasional Papers contribute to ongoing intellectual reflection and debate on contemporary and emerging themes. Concentrating on application-oriented questions and social fields of action, they provide impetus for further research and discussion, and enhance the broadening of horizons within a comprehensive conceptualisation of public science.

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