
Tech helps refugees make journey – and survive when they arrive

07/09/2015



Local businesses are a gamble – some have started charging high prices for the privilege of plugging a phone in.

“It was very obvious that people were desperately trying to find ways to charge their phones,” says Kate Coyer, director of the Civil Society and Technology Project at Central European University in Budapest.

Smartphones are a vital survival tool for many of the millions [who have been forced to flee Syria](#). Some say they relied on their phone’s GPS to navigate the thousands of kilometres into Europe. For example, The International Rescue Committee (IRC) [documented](#) one man’s trip from Aleppo to Hamburg, Germany, travelling by ferry, train, taxi and on foot. Throughout the two-month journey, he said GPS helped guide the way.

In addition, Facebook groups offer critical advice for those thinking of fleeing or already on the road. Some groups will help connect traffickers with their clientele, for better or worse. Others post real-time updates about which areas are safe to travel through – where the water is fit to drink, for example.

On Friday, when one group boarded a train that appeared to be bound for the Austrian border but then found themselves stuck just 30 kilometres from Budapest in the town of Bicske, those

with phones posted warnings to those still waiting back in the capital.

WhatsApp is critical link

Meanwhile, social networks like WhatsApp also provide a critical link to friends and family left behind. Aid organisations have started to recognise the importance of a smartphone. In Jordan, a United Nations office hands out SIM cards. In Lebanon and northern Iraq, the IRC has given out thousands of solar-powered chargers.

In Hungary, aid on the ground has been makeshift. Since last week, Coyer and her colleagues have been busy plugging power strips into the area's few available public outlets, so more people can use them. Over the long term, they're considering investing in more permanent power solutions, like solar panels or marine batteries –it all depends on how long the refugees will be around.

"There is no existing infrastructure in the area that can be used so we must supply it, buy it and build it. It is needed. It is imperative," she says.

To access the internet, the group has come up with an unusual hack: turning volunteers into walking Wi-Fi beacons. For about \$100, you can pick up a ready to use Wi-Fi hotspot and prepaid SIM cards, pop it all into someone's backpack, and send them out into the crowd. The networks last for about six hours before needing to be recharged, and can support around a dozen users at a time. They're all named "Free Wi-Fi, please no YouTube".

"I don't ever want to pit humanitarian needs in a crisis against each other, because it's not an either-or, but the communication needs are obviously very vital and need to be available at a moment's notice," says Coyer.

Online, other concerned outsiders have found ways to offer help. The blog [Refugees Welcome Pad](#), for example, compiles useful information like health brochures, asylum laws, or missing persons reports. It's currently enlisting people online to help translate documents into Arabic and Farsi.

Airbnb for refugees

Another helpful site, also named Refugees Welcome, based in Berlin, bills itself as "Airbnb for refugees". There, German citizens willing to share their homes or sponsor a month's worth of rent can connect with people who need somewhere to stay. The site has placed more than 140 refugees so far in homes in Germany and Austria.

The creators of the site are now working with volunteers from around the world, including the UK, France, Denmark and Australia, to set up similar services in their home countries. Iceland residents launched their own initiative to offer homes or services last week: a Facebook group named "Syria is calling".

One man, who fled Syria for Turkey, even launched an app for fellow refugees. Gherbetna offers step-by-step help to filling in government forms and maintains a list of job ads and friendly businesses. Newly arrived people can post more specific requests for help on a forum.

On social media, [Jillian York](#) of the Electronic Frontier Foundation is raising money to support

Coyer's group. Within a couple hours after her first post, hundreds of dollars had poured in. "People are amazing," she says.

For more about the health issues that affect refugees, read [Refugees at risk of measles and post-traumatic stress disorder](#)
