Mobile phones on mobile fields: co-producing knowledge about migration and violence

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It is a Triestino windy evening of October 2021 when I first visit *Piazza*.[1] The square's centre of gravitation is Ali's[2] *robab*, a lute-like musical instrument present throughout West, Central and South Asia. Its place of origin remains impossible to map, crisscrossing today states' boundaries, alike the melodies Ali is playing, and alike the crowd around him singing. A dozen of people on the move[3] who arrived that morning are from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran. Some of them left Bosnia-and-Herzegovina a few weeks earlier and walked all the way to Trieste. At that moment they seem to momentarily forget their injured feet and stomachs, in favour of the music. Ali is 31 years old, originally from Pakistan and speaks Pashto, among other languages. After obtaining the refugee status, he became a social worker and translator in Trieste. Based on his dedication, he has become one of the most famous interpreters on Piazza. Once every person has received proper health care, food, clothes, and information form the local associations, Ali takes his *robab* out and plays for the crowd and for himself. Those who are still in possession of their mobile phones[4] take a video of the improvised concert. Piazza now gathers people joining the crowd from even further away in time and space: a volunteer takes a video to share it on social media later. Another person from Pakistan is on a WhatsApp video call with a cousin who is still on the other side of the border, in Bihac in Bosnia. Through a Facebook messenger call, Hamed, a young Afghan, calls his mother who remains in a refugee camp on the island of Chios. Having exchanged some words with Hamed prior to the call, he introduces me to his mother on the call, and I enter her screen, sending greetings with hand gestures and smiles. Hamid later tells me it has been a few months they were not directly in touch. He would update his uncle who would then inform his family. But it is on *Piazza*, once he gets access to the public WIFI and right state of mind, that he feels like calling his mother. During hard migration journeys one does not up-

[2] All names in this article have been changed for purpose of anonymity.
[3] The term "people on the move" encompasses a wide range of different legal statuses of people being in a process of migration (asylum seekers, migrants and refugees) without hierarchical categorisations.
[4] The terms "mobile phones" and "smartphones" are used interchangeably. They are broadly defined as digital communication devises allowing to communicate and record in multimedia formats, to use and exchange GPS localisations and social media applications.

date the family regularly. Months or years in official or makeshift camps, and in "jungles" (thick forests) are nothing one wants to share with loved ones. In migration research however, the ethnographer attempts to cover all these spaces and understand the way people on the move themselves experience them. While the opacity surrounding some spaces such as closed camps and borders are challenging to observe, isn't this opacity just one side of the coin? The other side of the coin being the transparency over other parts of the journey, and people's willingness to share events such as this concert on *Piazza*.

Piazza refers to *Piazza Libertà,* its official name*,* or *Piazza del Mundo,* its unofficial but more common name used among residents and visitors. *Piazza* faces Trieste main railway station. In 2019, Trieste city authorities have closed institutional emergency reception centres as part of measures to contain the coronavirus. Local associations have since then taken the central stage in supporting people on the move with healthcare assistance and basic supplies. Nurses from this solidarity group heal physical injuries, in particular foot injuries due to long distances walked. They also distribute warm food, shoes, clothes and sleeping bags to allow people to stay overnight before pursuing their journey. The silos (ancient arcades) near the train station become their accommodation for one night or a few. Together with these items, volunteers provide guidance and exchange a few words or long conversations, often joyful and always generous. Triestin grassroot solidarity groups are therefore present every day on *Piazza*. Until 2014, people on the move reached Europe through Greece but increased controls at the Greek borders forced them to use the Balkan land route. The so-called Balkan route from Greece to central Europe has gone through a series of changes. Since 2015, a trajectory tended to start in Turkey, through Greece, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia and Italy. After Hungary built a barrier on its border with Serbia and Croatia in 2015, Bosnia became a pivotal state on the migration way towards central Europe. On the Italian eastern border, people started to arrive either in Gorizia, or Trieste. Both cities are located close to the Slovenian border. Seasonal cycles in Europe, as well as political cycles in the European Union and in the countries of origin and border areas affect the composition and the track of the Balkan route. From hundreds of daily arrivals in the summer, there are only up to a dozen arrivals in the winter, when the air reaches low temperatures. Nurses, interpreters and social officers support people who arrive. Yet, alike a social magnet, *Piazza* also attracts a multitude of more casual visitors, Italians and foreigners: residents, homeless people, volunteers from other political and religious associations, local administrators, journalists, photographers, and social science researchers like me.

As I observe Ali's gaze on his *robab*, people's joyful faces around him (or rather, half faces due to the masks), and hands holding mobile phones, orbiting around, I find the scene fascinating and without questioning it too much, I also get my mobile phone out to film the scene. Keeping a record of this gathering seems to be an evidence of resilience of people who keep their spirits up despite harsh physical and emotional journeys. It also shows the ingenuity of people on the move and refugee-support networks to find ways to survive. Many times since then, I could both observe and participate in such scenes at different points of the "Balkan route" where mobile phones occupied a central, even if mundane, stage. They allowed a mixing of face to face and online presence bringing together different audiences. "Field experts" – people on the move – equipped with their phone's cameras and messaging platforms were producing knowledge on migration in different media forms, for different audiences. And with different purposes?

My research in anthropology on Afghan migration trajectories in Europe focuses on mobile phones because they have become essentials for people on the move. People use them to find their way to safety, update the family and loved ones, and produce knowledge on migration, like

on *Piazza*. Following Barth, knowledge is «what a person employs to interpret and act on the world» (Barth 2002: 1). Migration is a field where sharing knowledge takes place in a highly politicised arena full of risks, because asylum seekers are often engaged in illegalised practices to reach asylum. How is then the anthropological knowledge I produce for my PhD articulated with that produced by people on the move themselves? How can mobile phones help us co-producing knowledge on the Balkan route? What is the impact of the context of border violence?

Scholars, journalists and support-groups have reported the way technology is an integral part of the migration events at the borders of Europe in 2015-16. During the summer of 2015 and ever since, people on the move have made extensive use of smartphones to remain in contact with their families, and to navigate their way to safety. While the literature has covered a range of aspects of this Balkan route – from the involvement of humanitarian actors or the role of camp infrastructures, to the responsibility of European policies and transnational solidarity practices – mobile phones have received less attention. Yet they put into more contrast the positionality of the ethnographer who is integrated in this context of knowledge production, violence, and mobility. Scholars have contextualised the socio historical texture of the Balkan route, and de-orientalised the Balkans to counter the stereotypical perception of this region as being backward and heading towards parcelization (Todorova 2009). An approach has been to focus on the different phases of the Balkan route (Kasparek 2016), the legal and political ambivalences of this passageway (Santer, Wriedt 2017), the role of activist networks (El-Shaarawi, Razsa 2018), the issue of temporality and (im)mobilities (degli Uberti, Altin 2021) and trajectories and tactics of migrants along the road (Altin 2021). In my research, I started by looking at the role of technology (Latonero, Kift 2018, Gillespie et al. 2018), but I soon realised that a focus on the use of mobile phones was a fertile ground to understand each of these approaches, and in particular, from people on the move's own perspectives. My knowledge of migration is therefore inherently co-produced. I complement my ethnography with digital ethnography, meaning that I employ the techniques of participant-observation for online research. Face to face encounters as well as exchanges on social media are my source of findings. The digital is also a tool for maintaining relationships with participants and generate other findings over prolonged periods (Baker 2013; Hine 2017). The ethnographic methodology of multi-sited fieldwork takes yet another dimension with the impetus to include this multi-modality. Our communications with research participants are often in Farsi, Dari, sometimes in English and French, and always with voice messages mixing languages.

People on the move use their mobile phones to share images together with commentaries, GPS location points, photos, and Facebook accounts of refugee-support organisations. The digital is then key in constituting *Piazza*, in informing people on the move why and how to reach it. I could observe the way the image and "reputation" of *Piazza* circulates among those attempting to reach Italy from Bosnia. Hamid, 24 years old from Mazar-e Sharif, shares with me his impression of *Piazza* in the conversations we have during the next three days, during his short stay in the city. He tells me in Dari: "When I arrived here, I immediately recognised this statue [of Empress Elizabeth of Austria on the side of *Piazza*]. One of my friends who has passed here a few months ago told me about this square and sent me a picture of the statue". While migration studies for long have focused on "arrival", "transit" and "destination" points, *Piazza* shows that a city can represent all these different points at once: it is the terminal of the so-called "Balkan route", it is the transit point for many who immediately continue their route towards central Europe, it also becomes the destination of those willing to stay or those obliged to come back after

a Dublin resettlement. *Piazza* is therefore a key part of the "Balkan route", both geographically, and in terms of what it means for those who made it: having survived border crossing.

For many, Trieste is the first city where people on the move can rest briefly after having crossed one of the stricter European borders, namely Croatia. Some have dwelled for up to three years in the border towns between Bosnia and Croatia before having eventually "won the game", i.e. crossed the border. Yet entering Italy in this way is considered to be irregular and those apprehended up to 10 km from the border fear pushbacks. Once in the city, those who decide to remain can turn to the assistance of the Italian Consortium of Solidarity (ICS). Yet entering an official centre of registration means applying for asylum and many wish to reach other European countries and fear the activation of the Dublin regulations, whereby asylum seekers are sent back to the first European country they entered. Advocacy groups have continuously asked for compliance with international law and the end of the use violence at European borders as a deterrence or effective part of border management. They have asked that perpetrators of illegal treatments must be held accountable. In such an instance, local associations do more than humanitarian work, they also denounce the range of violent practices they witness. Yet journalists, human rights advocates, and scholars have published stories at least since 2016. Amplifying their voices has only led to some minimal political changes.

The story of the Balkan route is a story of systematic pushbacks (illegal deportation) and violence. Between January and April 2021 civil society organizations collected testimonies of over 2.100 cases of pushbacks in Italy, Greece, Serbia, Bosnia, North Macedonia, Hungary, including "chain pushbacks" involving various countries[5]. According to these reports, over a third of pushbacks are accompanied by rights violations by national border police and law enforcement officials such as denial of access to asylum procedure, physical abuse, theft, and destruction of belongings. The smashing of mobile phones is an integral part of a cycle of violence at the border. When I collect testimonies, even without asking, people talk about their mobile phones. Apart from their physical and mental wounds, the destruction of the smartphone is perceived as an essential point. To articulate anthropological knowledge with other kinds of knowledge produced by people on the move, and to situate this co-production of knowledge in the context of violence in the Balkan route, I suggest looking from the vantage point of practices around mobile phones.

Fieldnotes: a digital ethnography with Hussain

Today, mid-November, there has been a dozen of arrivals on *Piazza del Mundo*. A young boy, Hussain, is with Anna, one of the grassroot organisations' nurse. Alike other people on the move stopping for a night in Trieste, Hussain sits on a bench, lying his leg to the other bench where Anna heals his injured foot and arm. He leans on some rucksacks and sleeping bags while a crowd that I join is chatting around him. I engage the conversation with him, shyly asking if he also speaks Farsi. His smile reminds me of that of my younger brother. He explains being 15 years old, from Ghazni, a city located in south-eastern Afghanistan. Hussain has arrived alone. First, I translate to Anna where and how he feels the pain. Then, I attempt to translate how grateful he is towards Anna and the support group. The second part is poetic and trickier to translate accurately.

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[5] https://drc.ngo/media/mnglzsro/prab-report-january-may-2021-_final_10052021.pdf

His journey from Bosnia lasted 13 days from the border city of Bihac. He was in a group that walked from 6 am to 10 pm, avoiding cities. He knew he needed to turn his phone off while crossing border points. He left Afghanistan four months ago, in June, and crossed through Iran, Turkey, Bulgaria, Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia before reaching Trieste. When he tried to cross into Bulgaria, he went into 20 days of quarantine. Being denied access to a phone, it is a guard who told him about the victory of the Taliban in Kabul in August 15. In the quarantine camp, alike a prison, he shared a room with 50 persons. He reasons that therefore he would rather not enter a quarantine camp anymore. He concludes: "*Pokhte mishi dar mohaajerat*", you get mature through migration. He would like to go to Switzerland. He tells me that in Belgrade a journalist took an interview of him asking his opinion about the Taliban take over. He responded that it is complicated for the Hazara minorities. He did not find the interview online, so we look for it together. Of course, even the 15 minutes we spend on Youtube using all kinds of keywords are not enough to find his interview. I say I will do more research and send him the link if I find something. We exchange our Facebook names. When it comes to introducing myself, I explain I am here to help with translations. I also explain that I work at the university to write a thesis on the issues faced by migrants and how smartphones can help or harm them. He responds positively, he repeats he is happy to help me in any way possible with my work. I wish him good luck for the rest of his journey and remain grateful that we will probably remain in contact through Facebook.

The same day, a member of the support group publishes a Facebook post telling the story of Hussain. "He is only 15 years old". Together with five photos including one of his blistered feet, his arm stiped by a branch from the "jungle" (the thick forest he crossed). It continues: "The infection can spread through the body and be deadly". More than 200 people "like" this post. In the meantime, we exchange some greetings on Messenger with Hussain who tells me he has left Trieste.

The next day, I wake up to a notification on my Facebook. Hussain has tagged me in one of his posts. He has published the post of Anna, adding a text in Farsi: "Sometimes, it happens to see angles from up close". He has tagged my profile name as well as that of Anna surrounded with heart emojis. His text continues: "Before you migrate, you think you have all the support when travelling but in the journey, you see that nor your ethnic pairs (*growm*), acquaintances nor friends can be there for you. Then you realise there is nobody behind you except your mother and father. You must move forward [on your own] to reach home, and this is a bitter truth. I hope all dear ones will be fine and healthy wherever they might be. Thanks to Madame Nina and Italian aunt, thanks a million". I also see a 5-second "story" he published on Facebook. It is a picture taken by someone from him head to toe, standing in front of Trieste railway station, wearing a mask, standing somehow proudly. In Farsi, it is written "Italy", together with the name of a famous Afghan song *Sham Shamak Man*. Almost as a myotatic reflex, I "like" his post and take a screenshot. My reaction to his story appears on our Facebook Messenger conversation and propels a new conversation: I enquire about his trip: he answers that he is in the train to Milano. He also has some questions about Swiss asylum procedures for minors: is it true they examine your age by testing your bones? I tell him I will ask how the Swiss asylum process works for minors and send him information.

The next day, as I want to share my concern to a friend, when I look for Hussain's profile and his post, they are nowhere to be found. I try to call Hussain, but no answers. His profile has been deleted.

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This vignette encapsulates the stakes of producing anthropological knowledge among other forms of knowledge production about migration using mobile phones. The Balkan route as a field showcases the complex where knowledge on migration is produced by different actors. This encounter with Hussain is a rich field of reflexion on the co-production of knowledge as it raises methodological and ethical questions. I remain with some interrogations: although Hussain gave me what counts as an informed consent when we met, what should I do with the screenshots I have taken, knowing that he has deleted all traces of his stay in Trieste? I want to keep a trace of this social history, but I face the challenge of, on the one hand, the abundance of data, and the instantaneous nature of their (dis)apparition. Scholars and practitioners in the field of asylum are well familiar with the incentive of individuals to lie about their journey. In particular in the Balkan route, people attempt to free themselves from the Dublin regulations. Social media posts put into emphasis the paradoxical need to both show one's journey when it is successful, and to leave no trace of passage through some countries to avoid the activation of the Dublin regulation. How to store archives, knowing that my research participant and friend may wish to delete them before continuing his migration journey? The way I answer these questions is by keeping in mind the overarching aim of the no-harm principle. Mobile phones say something important about the way border violence operate in people on the move's experience, as well as the structure of the knowledge one can produce.

Mobile phones therefore have to be tackled, but with ethical precautions. After realising the importance of mobile phones in migration trajectories, I started directing my questions in my different ethnographic fields in Trieste and at the border between Bosnia and Croatia. Even without asking, people take their phones out to show me photos of mistreatments carried by border forces, for instance in the "deportation vans". Blisters ripped open after long walks back to the starting point are yet other instances of the intentional violence carried at the borders. On the one hand, the asylum system requires one to set foot on the territory to seek asylum, which compels people to participate in illegal crossing of borders. On the other hand, officers tend to ignore requests for asylum and deport people on the move on the grounds that their crossing is illegal. Worse, illegal deportations together with instances of ill-treatments by the border state authorities amounting to torture have sadly become normalised in the Balkan route. This fact has been recognised even by the Council of Europe[6]. Recording these mistreatments can hold the carriers responsible. This might be the reason why so many mobile phones' cameras are destructed at borders.

In my different fields, I could observe how mobile phones are used to scapegoat people on the move as smugglers. Frontex, the agency for control and protecting the European union borders, bases part of its investigation against smuggling on the usages of smartphones. It published clear guidance about what officers have to or can do with migrants and refugees' phones to get access to sensitive data[7]. Yet many grey zones are highly problematic and open to use of violence (eg. how to force someone to unlock their phone). Practically, the testimonies I gathered say the border authorities asks the person to unlock the phone. This is so systematic that after a few attempts at crossing the border, some people on the move have already unlocked their phones. The border guard sometimes looks at maps to find location points, and contact numbers of

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[6] https://www.euronews.com/2021/09/14/alleged-police-brutality-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina-could-be-torture-says-council-of-europe (accessed 27/7/2022).
[7] https://www.statewatch.org/media/2870/eu-frontex-europol-digitalisation-migrant-smuggling-report-12353-21.pdf (accessed 27/7/2022).

smugglers. People on the move report that not all phones are destroyed: expensive phones such as iPhones are kept. There have also been many cases of state authorities breaking the charging unit, or the sim card holder unit. The violence also applies on a psychological level, as a few people declared that officers opened their Facebook accounts and laughed at their pictures. There are other indirect effects yet with physical consequences: after a deportation, the person is left without a phone, without a map and has to reorient to find a way back alone. All in all, these practices seem to be both part of intimidation, and aim at stopping people or at least slowing them down.

People on the move, as well as those standing in solidarity with them and against border violence, are aware of these risks and develop strategies to cross borders with smartphones. Such strategies range from going offline when crossing the border, taking low quality phones on purpose, deleting, and safeguarding their data on another account. At the same time, if their phones are empty of data, it happens that officers ask why this is so, what are they hiding? It is seen as suspicious.

Members of solidarity groups, alike the ethnographer, witness a violence they feel the need to publish about. How does the knowledge I co-produce on migration on the Balkan route interact with that of grassroots militant organisations? Members of Trieste associations often publish photos of the minors' feet they heal together with a brief of the persons and their trajectories. This beholds the double aim to raise awareness on this humanitarian emergency at the borders of Europe, and to raise funds for the association, so it can continue to provide the care needed. There are parallels with the work of the ethnographer: working on migration issues in this context means witnessing a high degree of violence that one often feels the urge to publish about. However, publications that highlight people on the move's agency to misleading counter conceptual views of their passivity and vulnerability are confronted with the challenge of not divulgating their strategies to counter the violence. There is an urge to go beyond academic papers: but then how to communicate results beyond academia? On the ground, a collaboration grows between local organisations, people on the move and the ethnographer. Conjointly working in favour of mobility is however not part of the official aims of an academic work. The on-the-ground collaboration is however essential to gain access to research participants. The ethnographer often exchanges language skills and knowledge for cultural mediation against access to people on the move who receive service and trust the organisations.

Similarly, there can be a tangible partnership with the people on the move. They are co-producing knowledge in an unprecedented way through their own multimedia creations. However, new ethical challenges appear on how to reach an informed consent on the use, storing, publication of the data that is produced. Such "evidence" of passage through some countries can have a positive conceptual effect but a negative impact on the rest of the asylum process. The question has to be answered with an attention to the different audiences, with sensibility for a fair evaluation of risk. Practices around mobile phone – be it to publish or hide parts of the journey - are integrally part of these dynamics of violence. Deleting messages, sharing stories that are aimed to disappear become part of what a digital ethnography needs to capture and write about.

The interaction between mobile phones and mobile fields is both extending and transforming previous ways of conducting participant observation and relating to the field. Research participants are now part of a multidimensional field which is now both multi-sited and multimodal. As migration dynamics are entangled with the use of violence at borders, the double trend of the extraordinary use of violence and the normalisation of it leads to the question of the role of knowledge production in this (mine)field. All in all, the focus on mobile phones allows

to reflect on potentialities in the co-production of knowledge on migration and violence. It raises methodological and ethical questions and highlight the moral impetus of denouncing violence, without harming further.

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