Chapter 1
"They Are Thirsty for Internet More Than Water":
Learning and Cognitive Development Among Young Refugees Undergoing Migration

Luka Lucić
Pratt Institute, USA

Lora E. Liharska
Teachers College, Columbia University, USA

ABSTRACT

The potential benefits of the Internet in providing stand-in educational experiences to displaced young people cannot be overstated. However, actualizing these educational potentials requires much future work in research and practice. By describing the initial theoretical and practical considerations for how these potential benefits can be translated into real-life benefits for refugee children, this chapter serves as an initial step in that direction.

INTRODUCTION: THE NEED FOR CONNECTIVITY

Be a good neighbor, open your network! This is the slogan of Projekat Otvorena Mreža (Project Open Net). Based in Osijek – a town situated at the trijunction of the Croatian, Hungarian and Serbian borders – Project Open Net is an open source inspired volunteer organization that started by encouraging residents to safely

open their wireless networks to others in need of free Internet access. The project began in 2009 with the local aim of facilitating community progress and mutual cooperation among the residents of Osijek (Kelava, 2013). However, beginning in 2015, as thousands of refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and beyond embarked upon a mass migration toward Western Europe, the project's mission abruptly transformed and gathered a transnational character. Many refugees chose to travel via the Balkan route, which spans Greece, Bulgaria, and Macedonia in the south, and Serbia, Hungary, and Croatia in the north. As it happens, one of the main points of transit along the Balkan route is the town of Osijek, home to Project Open Net.

According to a report by European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex Risk Analysis Unit (2017) more than 700 thousand displaced people took the Balkan route in 2015. The countries of the Western Balkans– historically more accustomed to sending economic and political migrants abroad than receiving them (Sardon, 2001) – are rarely the final intended destinations for refugees forced out of their homes by the conflicts in the Middle East and Levant. Instead, the countries of the Western Balkans are the transit points along a migratory journey for those refugees seeking the economic and political stability of Western Europe. And since a refugee journey from the Middle East to Germany, Sweden, or Denmark can last many months, refugees often spend considerable amounts of time passing through Athens, Thessaloniki, Skopje, and Belgrade, or staying in refugee camps such as those in Šid, Slavonski Brod, and Tovarnik – a town located in close proximity to Osijek.

Prolonged stops along the journey allow aid workers across the Western Balkans to get to know refugees and assemble a profile of their most imminent needs. Aside from basic existential necessities such as food, water, clothing, and shelter, reports from the field increasingly highlight an especially poignant need: *the need for connectivity*. More specifically, access to the Internet, usually via refugees' smartphones, has been identified not only as essential for the purpose of interpersonal interaction and connection, but also as critically important for organizing the migratory journey (GSMA, 2017). Aid agencies have seized upon this need quickly. A report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) notes that connectivity has the potential to transform the way aid agencies respond to the protection needs of displaced peoples, by creating "a powerful multiplier effect, boosting the well being of refugees and of the communities that host them" (UNHCR, 2016).

Volunteer groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – such as Project Open Net and Refugee Aid Miksalište (located near Belgrade's bus and train stations) – have also quickly recognized the need for connectivity. To meet it, these organizations often feature big green "Free WiFi" signs posted on their office doors. However, volunteers of Project Open Net have gone even further. To expand their reach, they created mobile WiFi kits by hacking a home router, connecting the router to a battery and packing everything into backpacks with antennas sticking

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