App and coming: an 'Uber migration'?

by Roderick Parkes

European citizens are increasingly using online platforms to relieve the pressure on social services caused by the migration crisis. Through positive initiatives such as refugees-welcome.org (whereby citizens with a spare bedroom advertise it online for refugees) and the Kiron Refugee University, citizens are matching migrants with housing and education, and spreading information about available resources. Broadly following the same principles as for-profit platforms like Airbnb, SnapGoods, TaskRabbit or Getaround, these initiatives are using the 'sharing economy' to absorb migrants. But these efforts to welcome migrants tell only a small part of the story: migrants themselves are harnessing the potential of online communications.

Migrants are linking up online to cross borders and meet their basic needs. They are using smartphones to share tips and geo-positional data as they cross North Africa. They rank and rate Afghan people-smugglers, trying to hold the criminals accountable for the safe transport of family members. On Google they share tips, such as to avoid exploitative Istanbul taxi drivers or evade new EU border controls. Just like in the familiar sharing model, migrants are brokering information about how to access useful resources. Only, in this case, the resources in question are held in other territories and the information is about crossing borders.

Inevitably perhaps, this is being labelled 'Uber migration' – the democratisation of travel opportunities through new technology. Just as the online transportation company transformed the way people crossed

cities, 'Uber migration' transforms the way people cross continents. In the world's least-developed states, mobile phone subscriptions grew by 400% between 2005 and 2011 and smartphones are suddenly available thanks to the sale of handsets for under $100. Research from Jordan suggests 86% of young Syrian migrants can access a smartphone and, of the new arrivals to Greece early this year, 23% organised their journey via social media and 11% on mobile apps.

It is not hard to see how the EU might harness this new technology to better manage migration. Take the EU's own 'migrant-sharing' scheme. The EU's refugee relocation scheme has been undermined by a lack of trust: local communities refuse to take in unknown migrants, and migrants refuse to put their trust in European authorities. The sharing economy runs precisely by building trust between people who do not know each other: individuals share personal information online, and gain a kind of 'credit rating'. But, to harness new technologies in this way, the EU must first overcome the fundamental challenge 'Uber migration' poses to its refugee and migration policy.

How to protect Uber migrants?

The first challenge comes in the field of international protection. Techfugees and other new organisations promote a picture of Uber migrants as tech-savvy masters of their own destiny, quite unlike the vulnerable migrants of the past. They have therefore begun developing the tools migrants need to help themselves – Geecycle, which allows citizens to donate

smartphones, or Crisis Info Hub, which pools tips on transit routes to Europe. And yet, these organisations, for all their technological sophistication, have little actual interaction with refugees. They have rolled out dozens of apps to recruit migrants into the workforce, but it has become clear that few of the new arrivals have the skills to work immediately in an advanced economy.

The established humanitarian organisations promote a more classical vision of 'Uber migration'. They argue that these migrants are just as vulnerable as their predecessors; the new technology merely makes the new arrivals better at calling for help. These big organisations thus monitor migrants' online activities to hone their humanitarian response: if migrants called for help on twitter, say, then the big NGOs would get there fast. And yet, in effect, this approach tends to underestimate migrants, disempowering them by taking information out of their hands. The NGOs harvest big data, creating abstract datasets which improve only their own decision-making.

So what is the truth about information and communications technology (ICT) and its supposedly empowering effects? Most obviously, the internet does little to help the most vulnerable people, those who cannot cross borders: virtual networks will not bring them the things they need – this would require physical communications links like roads or at least drones carrying pre-diagnostic health tools, portable batteries and 3D printers. As for the small section of the global population ready to travel, ICT opens up dangerous opportunities: people who ordinarily have neither the skills nor money to reach Europe suddenly sense the opportunity to do so.

When crossing borders, these poorly-educated 'Uber migrants' tend to use low-tech strategies and just a smattering of these high-tech tools. This makes it particularly hard for EU authorities to protect them. Because young migrants are often only semi-literate and communicate with each other online in a low-tech mix of 'Arabeasy' and Emojis, for instance, Frontex cannot harvest information from migrants' online chatter and improve its early-warning system. Similarly: Uber migrants, who might wire money to family online, will use old-fashioned cash transfers when paying smugglers. Europol has struggled to track these smuggling networks since the money trail quickly goes cold.

How to regulate Uber migration?

Uber migration marks a further step in the globalisation of the sharing economy. On paper, this is a positive thing: Uber migration should help the global community better use its resources, as people cross borders to escape resource shortage. In reality, any such efficiency will be incredibly disruptive. Financial commentators already talk about the 'uberisation' of Europe's economies. This is the process by which tech-savvy consumers undercut the large firms which own large numbers of physical assets. Tech-savvy migrants are having a similarly disruptive effect. They can use new technologies to 'gate-crash' labour markets and welfare systems.

Uber migration is clearly a harbinger of the future. So should EU governments meekly clear the way for this insurgent new economy, or crack down on it? EU governments face calls, for instance, to create new migrant-sponsorship programmes, to help communities give irregular migrants legal channels to the EU. The idea is to allow poor migrants from places such as Nigeria or Gambia to use their savings as start-up capital inside Europe rather than using their money to pay people-smugglers. This would certainly make the Uber migration more efficient, but is that reason enough for governments capitulate in this way and lift their border controls?

EU border authorities are taking a strategic approach to the dilemma: they are trying to harness and define the new sharing economy on their own terms. The EU has launched a data-sharing platform to link up border forces across Africa and, every three months, it rolls out a new cooperation platform in a migration hotspot like Pakistan. Through Eurostat, the EU is harvesting data on people-smuggling in order to introduce a 'metric' by which to measure policy impact. Policymakers are also looking at options such as crowdsourcing asylum experts to translate court outcomes across the EU to improve legal harmonisation.

But, by embracing the sharing economy in this way, EU authorities face a new dilemma: what are the limits of their sharing and collaboration? Frontex officials have discussed launching an app warning irregular migrants about bad weather, in order to put them off travelling and encourage them to share data with the authorities. But it is clearly controversial for the EU to share with irregular migrants in this way. Europol has set its Internet Referral Unit the task of monitoring smuggling websites. It too faces questions about whether it should remove information from illicit websites which might help with investigations into smuggling gangs or even get migrants to safety.

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