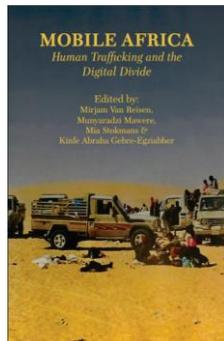# Network Gatekeepers in Human Trafficking: Profiting from the Misery of Eritreans in the Digital Era

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

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Human Trafficking and the Digital Divide**

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Chapter 2

Network Gatekeepers in Human Trafficking: Profiting from the Misery of Eritreans in the Digital Era[1]

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

Introduction

In 2009, the connectivity of mobile phones was realised at a global level (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2018a). Around the same time, a new form of human trafficking emerged in the Sinai desert of Egypt, which came to be known as Sinai trafficking (Van Reisen, Rijken & Estefanos, 2012). Whereas human trafficking usually involves the secret extortion of people, this form of trafficking relied on others knowing what was going on. Vulnerable people who had been displaced

Human trafficking for ransom is a new form of trafficking facilitated by digitally-supported communication, particularly, mobile phones. But why do Eritreans appear to be among the most vulnerable to this form of trafficking? This chapter looks at the role of network gatekeepers, and the dependence of Eritrean refugees, who live in a 'black hole' in the digital architecture, on these gatekeepers, placing them at the mercy of smugglers and traffickers.

from their homes, many of whom were Eritrean refugees, were kidnapped or transported under false pretences, only to be locked in human trafficking warehouses and tortured for ransom. All the

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[1] This chapter is based on a presentation at the 23rd Karlsruhe Dialogues held at the Karlsruher Institut für Technologie (KIT) Generale in Germany. A different article based on the presentation was prepared with the working title: 'The (un)intended role of gatekeepers of information in human trafficking in the Digital Era' (authors: Van Reisen, M., Smits, K., Stokmans, M. & Mawere, M.) for the Karlsruhe Institute für Technologie (undated).

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 cries of those being tortured to induce them to pay the ransom. This new form of human trafficking for ransom depends heavily on digitally-supported communication, especially mobile phones and mobile payments, that can be controlled by the traffickers. The link between the emergence of this form of human trafficking and the simultaneous widespread introduction of digital technology has been described by some scholars (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015; Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017; Van Reisen *et al.*, 2018a), but remains largely unexplored.

Control over the flow of information accessible to victims – a key characteristic of 'network gatekeeping' (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008) – is a necessary condition for the modus operandi used by the human traffickers. As has already been noted, digital technology plays a key role in the modus operandi of human traffickers for ransom, allowing them to exchange information freely, track and target vulnerable refugees, and remain anonymous (DSP-Groep & Tilburg University, 2016; Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017). This chapter seeks to elaborate on the concept of network gatekeepers and their control of information flows in the context of human trafficking, using Eritrea as a case study. It looks at network gatekeepers in a new light, in the context of today's uneven digitally-connected world, which is exacerbated by the digital architecture in place. As a case-study, this chapter explores 'gatekeeping' in the lives of Eritreans during the trajectories of human trafficking that have emerged in the last decade. Eritrea is used as a case study, because it is an extremely closed country, at the bottom of the ranking of free access to information and open communication (Reporters Without Borders, 2019), while at the same time producing a large number of victims of human trafficking relative to other countries (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017). Eritrea also has a monopolised digital architecture, owned by the ruling party (the only party), which runs the country.

The main research question is: *How is the mediating role of network gatekeepers intertwined with the human trafficking of Eritreans and how does the*

digitalisation of communication influence this situation? It is hoped that answering this question will help us to understand the modus operandi of the network gatekeepers in an uneven digitally-connected world. The study is also expected to provide us with information about the new forms of human trafficking that are victimising Eritrean refugees so that more effective policies can be put in place to stop this tragedy.

Network gatekeepers

Open communication or open access to, and distribution of, information is related to 'social capital'. The term 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. However, structural holes in communication and information flows exist where the connections between groups are weak. Information brokers can facilitate the flow of information across such structural holes, effectively controlling the information flows (Burt, 2000) and regulating the access to open communication of the people involved. This control over the flow of information is a key characteristic of network gatekeepers (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008).

The concept of network gatekeepers was introduced by Karine Barzilai-Nahon, who focused on gatekeeping in digital networks. She restricted gatekeepers to social entities such as people and organisations and defined 'gatekeeping' as "a type of control exercised on information as it moves in and out of gates" (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008, pp. 1496–1497). However, we believe that the architecture of digital networks and the software used (such as apps) also control the flow of information. Consequently, in this chapter we define 'network gatekeepers' as social *or digital* entities (such as human traffickers and the architectures of digital networks and software) that exercise gatekeeping. This definition is broader than former definitions of gatekeeping (see, for example, Shoemaker, 1991), as it also includes the information that goes out of a gate, i.e., the information the gated, such as victims of human trafficking, can

send to intended receivers of the information, such as relatives or friends. The gated are people subjected to gatekeeping (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008, p. 1496). The gated can be subjected to gatekeeping by his or her own free will (for example, as a strategy to handle information overload), or have it forced upon him/her (as in human trafficking). A gate refers to an "entrance to or exit from a (social or digital) network or its section" (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008, p. 1496). One should realise that the existence of a deterministic gate is not realistic in social or digital networks, due to the dynamics of such networks, as well as developments in digital and information technologies.

Now that the main concepts are clear, we will elaborate on the process of gatekeeping. Usually, the process of gatekeeping is described by means of 'gatekeeping mechanisms', which are defined as tools, technologies or methodologies used to carry out the process of gatekeeping (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008, p. 1496). These mechanisms include different aspects of information handling, such as the selection, addition, manipulation, timing, disregarding and deletion, of information (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008, p. 1497). These actions are performed by the gatekeeper. However, by focusing only on the actions overlooks the social process between the gatekeeper and the gated, as well as the motives of the gatekeeper and the gated to accept or engage in information control. According to symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Hewitt & Shulman, 2011), these motives dictate what and how gatekeeping mechanisms are performed, as they evolve in the roles of the gated and the gatekeeper, as well as the action-reaction involved in the social process of information control. By looking at gatekeeping as a social process, the relationship between the gated and the gatekeeper becomes the core of gatekeeping. We will investigate this relationship in the case of the human trafficking of Eritrean refugees for ransom. But first, let's look at the uneven digitally-connected world.

The uneven digitally-connected world

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 and the digital architecture. Castells (2000) argues, in his three-volume work *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, 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 this chapter, the term black holes is also used to refer to gated areas in a digital or social network. The term describes locations with no, or limited, access to digital networks, software that can only handle specific information, and structural holes caused by incompatible apps or social networks of different groups of people. Information does not flow freely through these gates, but can be mediated by a gatekeeper. These gatekeepers mediate the ability of individuals to access information that is relevant to them and distribute information freely to intended receivers.

So, what is the situation regarding such black holes in Africa? In most parts of Africa, people do not have much say over their digital infrastructure, because information is disseminated and data mined according to Eurocentric norms, which Williams (2017) calls 'digital imperialism'. As Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans, Nakazibwe, Van Stam and Ong'ayo (Chapter 1, *Black Holes in the Global Digital Landscape: The Fuelling of Human Trafficking on the African Continent*) show, the structure of the digital architecture bears close resemblance to the architecture of the information society created during 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 was used by European traders. This knowledge turned into power – the people who were colonised and enslaved could not access this knowledge, nor use these networks and nodes. Van Reisen *et al.* (Chapter 1, *Black Holes in the Global Digital Landscape*) show that this 16th and 17th century infrastructure provides the foundation for the modern-day digital

infrastructure. Old colonial shipping routes and modern-day Internet routes (its cable networks and trajectories) and nodes, closely resemble each other. In addition, the collecting and handling of digital data is Eurocentric, as in colonial times. As a consequence, a lot of African people do not have access to digital infrastructure and, if they do, the facilities and information provided are predominantly Eurocentric.

This 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 described above. In the black holes in the digital architecture, those who have access to digital networks and specific apps can become powerful information brokers – or gatekeepers – who control the information flows within and across the black holes. In the context of black holes, information gatekeepers are middlemen and dictate both the information that people in black holes can *access,* and the information they can *produce* and *disseminate* to intended receivers. This is clearly visible in the context of human trafficking for ransom in Africa, where access to digital technology, as well as access to, production of, and distribution of, information is limited, so that gatekeeping is forced upon the gated by gatekeepers, such as human traffickers. In this chapter we will look at the human trafficking of Eritrean refugees for ransom as a case study to investigate the relationship between the gated and network gatekeepers more closely. But before we do, the following section sets out the research methodology.

Methodology

In Sinai trafficking, the first form of human trafficking for ransom described by researchers, the digital phone played a unique role and as many as 95% of the victims were of Eritrean origin (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2012; Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017). Similarly, in Libya, there is currently a large group of refugees of Eritrean origin being held by human traffickers, many of whom are being held for ransom. Eritrean refugees, therefore, appear to be extremely vulnerable to human

trafficking for ransom and provide an extreme case to study the interaction between gated and network gatekeepers in the digital era. Accordingly, the case study presented in this chapter focuses on Eritrean refugees. The study is based on a review of reports and communications with resource persons and victims of human trafficking. Data was collected in focus group discussions and interviews – including through social media. Information was also received through frequent contact on social media and in-depth written engagement with persons held in human trafficking situations. This information was cross checked with experts in the area. In addition, pictures and other visual material was collected to verify the information obtained. Cross checking was conducted to achieve an acceptable level of trustworthiness, proportionate to the extremely difficult area of research being conducted (including personal danger to the informants).

The data was collected in 2018 and 2019. The respondents and informants were of Eritrean origin and were residing either in Europe or North Africa, especially Libya, at the time. Detailed information was obtained from one of the camps in Libya where the refugees from Eritrea were being held. The interviews were carried out by the first and second authors of this chapter. For reasons of safety and security the names of all respondents are treated with anonymity. The next sections present the results of the research

The relationship between the gated and the gatekeepers

In order to describe the relationship between the gated and network gatekeepers, the theoretical framework proposed by Barzilai-Nahon (2008) is adopted. Barzilai-Nahon states that the gatekeeper-gated relationship relies on four characteristics: 1) the 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 network gatekeeper (directness, enduring nature); and 4) the political power of the network gatekeeper. In this section, we use these four characteristics to present the results of this research on the relationship between the gated and the gatekeeper.

Alternative information sources

Benkler suggests that the networked information economy increases an individual's autonomy by enlarging "the range and diversity of things that individuals can do for and by themselves" and by giving them an unlimited range of alternative sources of information and communication opportunities (2006, p. 133). However, this autonomy does not result in more freedom or power for ordinary people, due to self-regulation (Sunstein, 2001), strong control by gatekeepers, and black holes in the digital architecture caused by the unavailability of (access to) the Internet or the incompatibility of apps. The autonomy of the gated is contingent upon the gatekeepers legal and social rules, as well as the technologies provided (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008).

In Eritrea, strong controls by gatekeepers and black holes in the digital architecture limit the alternative sources of information available to the general public. The vast majority of information comes from the state media (gatekeeper), relatives abroad (gatekeeper), although this communication is restricted by the risk of surveillance, as will be explained later, satellite radio (gatekeeper) and other gatekeepers within the country, including those involved in human trafficking networks. Digital information plays only a meagre role as an information source, as Eritrea is a black hole in the current digital landscape. The World Bank estimates that in 2017, only 1% of the Eritrean population had access to the Internet (World Bank, n.d.). Internet cafes are available in places such as the capital, Asmara, but access to the Internet there is restricted by the knowledge that the government might be 'watching' – which can be regarded as a gatekeeping mechanism – thereby reducing most of the Eritreans to the status of citizens in a black hole (Chapter 5, *'Sons of Isaias': Slavery and Indefinite National Service in Eritrea*, by Mirjam Van Reisen, Makeda Saba & Klara Smits).

Mobile services are dominated by only one provider, which is Eritel. However, access to sim cards is severely restricted. Sim cards are only available to those with an ID card, and most of the country's youth are not able to obtain an ID, as it is contingent upon finishing

National Service (Chapter 5, *'Sons of Isaias'*, by Van Reisen, *et al.*). In order to obtain a sim card in Eritrea, a customer needs clearance from the authorities managing National Service (R., personal communication with Van Reisen, email, 24 May 2019). The majority of the working population in Eritrea are assigned to National Service, which is open-ended in duration and includes conditions of forced labour (Kibreab, 2017). As it is compulsory and indefinitely in practice, National Service is tantamount to modern day slavery (UN Human Rights Council, 2016).

The reality of this is described by a refugee, originally from Eritrea, now residing in the Netherlands. In his testimony he says that he was forced to work without a salary in construction from 2002 to 2015 when he fled Eritrea. If he did not obey the orders of the military commanders, he was put in prison, which happened twice. Over the years, the situation worsened and he decided to escape. He describes having hardly any access to communication or information:

> *We were not able to use a phone. The landlines were controlled and we could not speak freely. We could not give any information. We did not say anything. We spoke only in code. We were not allowed to have a sim card. It was not possible to communicate to explain the severity of our situation.* (D., interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 26 May 2019)

At the time of writing, it is still the case that people working on road construction in Eritrea (who are all assigned under National Service) are not allowed to have a mobile phone or a sim card.

Due to this situation, the Eritrean population relies on limited sources for the information they need. A select few may be able to circumvent surveillance and the blocking of social media by using virtual private networks (VPNs), but 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 National Service (Melicherová, 2019a), and rely heavily on gatekeepers, often smugglers or traffickers, for information (Van

Reisen & Mawere, 2017). These gatekeepers offer the only opportunity to escape from repression and are, therefore, often hailed as 'saviours' and parents tell their children to trust and follow what they say (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017).

Outside Eritrea, 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 access information on their destination (Bariagaber, 2013). A study by Kidane (2016) highlighted the reliance of refugee communities on social media for information and found that relatives are the most trusted source of information. However, along the migration routes, technological barriers restrict the use of mobile phones as tools of communication. In research done in one of Ethiopia's refugee camps, it was found that access to digital networks is highly restricted (Schoenmaeckers, 2018). The study by Schoenmaeckers found that young refugees had to employ all sorts of tricks to get even the smallest signal in order to send a message to their friends and family members, as connectivity in the camps is very poor. Person-to-person contact in the camps was regarded as the most common way of sharing information.

With limited access to digital networks to receive and send information, refugees easily fall prey to gatekeepers such as human traffickers. From the interviews, it emerged that the recruiters for the human trafficking organisations are never far away, with easy-to-find contacts who can tell you who to turn to. As Eritrean refugees often live in black holes and, thus, cannot freely access information, attempts to better inform refugees about the risks of migration are often ineffective. Internet access is too limited and the refugees rely on their close social networks for information (Van Reisen *et al*., 2018b). In addition, the camp officials who refugees turn to for information or assistance (Schoenmaeckers, 2018) are often unaware of official migration procedures (such as resettlement or family reunification) or not capable of helping the refugees to access these procedures (Chapter 16, *Refugees' Right to Family Unity in Belgium and the Netherlands: 'Life is Nothing without Family'*, by Mirjam Van Reisen, Eva

Berends, Lucie Delecolle, Jakob Hagenberg, Marco Paron Trivellato & Naomi Stocker).

Ability to produce and distribute information

Many technologies facilitate multiple applications that provide ready and easy-to-use apps that produce content that can be freely sent to intended receivers, giving the gated greater autonomy and reducing the control of gatekeepers (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). However, these apps and the digital networks that make their use possible are not as open and democratic as it appears. Besides technological barriers, there are political, economic, and social impediments that prevent the gated from reaching others with their intended message (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). In many cases, gatekeepers have created platforms with a specific architecture and specific policies set by the gatekeeper, that restrict what and how information can be posted by the gated. Moreover, by using these platforms, the gated are restricted in terms of the audience they can reach.

In Eritrea, the gatekeepers heavily restrict the opportunities of the gated to produce and distribute information freely. First of all, it is not only very difficult to obtain a sim card and to obtain access to a mobile phone, there is also no free press and limited access to social media, which is further restricted if there is any risk of protest (Africa News, 2019). Even if people do have access to a mobile phone or social media, it is not safe to send information (M., interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 26 May 2019; A., interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 12 May 2019). All outgoing phone and Internet traffic is heavily 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. […]. (UN Human Rights Council, 2015, p. 91)

Thus, Eritreans in Eritrea (the gated) have a very limited ability to produce and distribute information freely. This was also indicated by respondents who are forced to work in national service on road construction in Eritrea. When asked whether or not they could send information, pictures or videos to explain their situation, these informants responded that this was not allowed and could put them in great danger (M., interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face, 26 May 2019; A., interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 12 May 2019).

Those fleeing Eritrea are also restricted in their ability to receive, produce and distribute information, as they are often situated in digital black holes with limited or no connectivity. In limited ways, refugees trapped in situations of human trafficking and detention in Libya, attempt to contact many people, including journalists and international organisations, using their mobile phones to call for help (Sunderland, 2019). Using phones in these circumstances can carry great risk, if it is not done according to the conditions set by the human traffickers (Z., interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 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 ability of Eritrean refugees to produce and distribute information has meant that they are unable to access protection or be evacuated, such as would be expected under international standards, and the situation remains largely unknown to the public at large (Z., interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, Libya, May 2019).

Often, at the start of their journey, refugees are asked for a crucial piece of information by the smugglers or traffickers, people who they think are helping them. This is a phone number of a friend or relative and often a name and address as well (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017).

Friends or relatives are then contacted by the smugglers/traffickers to arrange payment for their trip. Some refugees enter into 'no-fee' migration deals (they are told they can pay later on arrival at their destination), which turns out to be trafficking for ransom. Even if the refugee has access to 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 after they have arrived at their intended destination (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2018b). This illustrates how the different parts of the human trafficking network cooperate and that the refugees are passed from one group within the network to another, perhaps all belonging to the same overarching organisation. Within these 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 the Sinai trafficking (Van Reisen and Mawere, 2017). Other names repeatedly come up in conversations with victims 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 the torture of their loved ones in order to induce them to pay large sums of money in ransom (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2012). New methods used to extract ransom include digital methods that keep up with the progress of technology, such as embarrassing pictures spread on Facebook (Hayden, 2019) and heart-breaking videos sent to family (CNN, 2018) via Facebook Messenger, Imo or WhatsApp. Whereas in Sinai trafficking, family and friends of victims were forced to listen to voices and sounds, trafficking for ransom has now progressed to videos that are published on social media (CNN, 2018). Digital technology is clearly providing opportunities for human traffickers to hone their modus operandi regarding the distribution of information about victims. In addition, desperate family members often turn to social media and fundraising platforms to collect money. They use the horrific images of torture to crowdfund ransoms (Hayden, 2019).

Although the use of social media may lead to the freedom of individual refugees, when their ransom has been paid – often multiple times – it also leads to ever higher ransoms and increasing numbers of victims.

The sounds and images of torture invoke feelings of shame for the victims. The shaming of victims appears part of a deliberate strategy to disempower the victims of human trafficking for ransom (Z., interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 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 are the victims traumatised, but their friends, families and the wider community as well. This, in combination with the crippling amounts of ransom that members of the Eritrean community have been forced to pay, has led to a situation where the Eritrean community is experiencing collective trauma (Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017). This collective trauma results in ever-increasing profits for the human traffickers. It can also discourage survivors and their families from exposing the practices of human traffickers beyond the Eritrean community.

Relationship between the gated and the gatekeepers
Putnam, Phillips and Chapman (1996) describe relationships as linkages or ties between nodes, which in our case are the gated and the network gatekeepers. Such linkages have different characteristics, such as reciprocity, directness, and strength due to endurance and frequency of contact between the two nodes (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Plickert, Cote, & Wellman, 2007, Putnam, *et al.*, 1996). Reciprocal, direct, and strong relations can produce a platform of negotiation between the gated and the gatekeeper.

First of all, victims of human trafficking do not have a reciprocal relationship with the human trafficker, as the human trafficker dominates the relationship. Smugglers and traffickers work together, keeping in touch using digital technology, to exchange information on refugees' 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 smuggler is intercepted by human traffickers, the smugglers often maintain their innocence in order to protect their reputation, whereas, in reality, they may have orchestrated the interception and 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 a trusted smuggler to family members and friends and may be more reluctant to give information about this part of the human trafficking infrastructure to legal agents.

Secondly, victims of human trafficking rarely have direct, face-to-face contact with the persons at the top of the human trafficking organisation – those organising the business, who decide what the next move will be. 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 different people from different places and of different nationalities. The collection of payments and ransoms is done anonymously, to avoid the tracing of the payments. Digital technology facilitates this anonymity.

Gatekeepers with no bad intentions – handlers or mediators communicating with the traffickers – often use code names and multiple sim cards from providers such as Lebara or Lycamobile, that do not require the users to be registered (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2018a). If friends or relatives are making the ransom payment – which can be from anywhere in the world – they are simply told where to leave the money. A refugee held in Libya explained how the money is paid:

> A: *When you enter Libya, the smugglers tell you to pay the chief.*
> MvR: *And how do you pay the chief? In Dubai or in Sudan?*
> A: *USD 7,500 is all paid in Dubai.*
> A: *USD 3,500 is paid in Sudan.*
> MvR: *The USD 7,500 that is paid in Dubai – do you pay it to a bank?*

A: They give only a telephone number in Dubai. Someone in Dubai has to call it, and then pay. (A., personal communication with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 16 February 2019)

After the money has been paid through several channels, usually by relatives, a number (code) is communicated to 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 regarding payments is used to avoid a direct and enduring relationship that could produce a platform of negotiation between the gated and the gatekeeper. This creates a further power difference and dynamics in the relationship between the traffickers and the refugees. Many victims of trafficking only hear the name of the top-level trafficker in passing, 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. In addition, the relationship between the gated and gatekeeper is rarely strong. The gated are frequently handed over to other gatekeepers along their journey. The victims are treated as commodities, and often sold from one trafficker to the other.

Political power
Barzilai-Nahon (2008) argues that this construct is important, as the main objective of a gatekeeper is to control information. The ability to do so can be framed in a power struggle between stakeholders who all have their own objectives or political interests. In the case of network gatekeeping and human trafficking, (political) power can be defined as the ability to get others to do what you want them to do, even if it is against their will (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Weber, Gerth & Mills, 1947).

Looking at the political power of the Eritrean refugees in relation to their Eritrean traffickers reveals a fairly straightforward first difference. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

(UNHCR) eligibility guidelines from 2011, which are still in place today, clearly identify Eritrean refugees as in need of international protection (UNHCR, 2011). 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 firmly intact in Eritrea. The political power in Eritrea is centralised in the hands of President Isaias Afwerki, there is no constitution, parliament or independent judiciary, and are no opposition parties (Plaut, 2017).

Without a free press, people within the country cannot express themselves publicly. Outside the country, even as far as Europe, Eritrean refugees cannot count on the support of Eritrean embassies, which have even been implicated in human trafficking (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017). Eritrean embassies have also been accused of threats and violence against, and the extortion of, Eritreans in the diaspora, to obtain a 2% diaspora tax, among other things (Buysse, Van Reisen & Van Soomeren, 2017). From this it is clear that within and outside 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 calls a "depoliticized humanitarian space" (2006, p. xiii). In 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 due to their wealth and connections. Research has shown that trafficking 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, those at the top of the regime benefit from it and do nothing to stop it (Focus group discussion, Van Reisen, 28 March 2019). Outside of Eritrea, the human traffickers have been seen as closely cooperating with state actors, such as officials in the Sudanese police, security and intelligence branches and Libyan military and non-state militia. This network gives the traffickers solid political connections and protection. A refugee explained:

Hegdef [PFDJ, the only political party in Eritrea] collaborates with all the regimes in the region. I was threatened in one country then moved on to the next country. There Hegdef approached me to work with them as informer and they offered USD 50,000. I refused. They sent people who beat me up badly but I still refused. They then attacked my family. They have put several of us in prison in this country. They pay their protection and they have all the power here. I am very scared now. I need to get out. But I don't have any options now. (B., interview with Van Reisen, face-to-face meeting, Egypt, 6 August 2019).

The political power of the human traffickers and smugglers in the region is confirmed by their use digital technology to gather intelligence, facilitate negotiations and transactions, and coordinate with local authorities. They also exchange information on what routes are safe and whether any law enforcement agents pose a threat to their operations, and they use global positioning system (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, 2016). Although they operate in an illegal space, the prosecution of human traffickers has been very limited in the context of human trafficking for ransom in Africa and has even ended up in the victimisation of the refugees, as well as humanitarian organisations seeking to assist them (Tondo, 2019; Bulman, 2019). Indeed, government officials up to the highest level are heavily involved in and profiting from smuggling people out of the country and are involved in international organisations for human trafficking for ransom (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017).

Due to this political power, human trafficking organisations can induce refugees to do things that they might not otherwise do, through information control. Promoting themselves as the only way to safety, the smugglers and 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 high risks, as well as accepting being pushed 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 putting 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; Z., interview with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, April–May 2019).

The power of human traffickers to induce fear in the refugee is very real, as is apparent from this message received from Libya by a refugee held in captivity in Libya since 2017: "Please remove me first from Libya, because when they know this information they can kill me" (A., personal communication with Van Reisen, 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 with him, making him request that all information received from him is immediately deleted: "Please take this message to your phone, because every time I will make delete after you put in your phone, because I am afraid always (A., personal communication with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 15 February 2019).

Some refugees held in captivity in Libya operate with a foreign sim card. 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 and 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 an ID card. Me, I don't have an ID card, so the only question is how to solve it. How to open a way of sending/receiving information? A sim card in Libya you can buy from these Arabs, but after a short time the man who sold it to you can close it.* (A., personal communication with Van Reisen, WhatsApp, 15 February 2019)

The experiences described show the level of fear induced in refugees in the process of trying to open communication channels and provide information about their situation, but also the difficulties experienced in trying to overcome the gatekeepers who stop 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 of their situation. They live in black holes in the digital architecture and entirely depend on gatekeepers to help them get information out. This creates extremely skewed power relations and dependency. The dependency of Eritrean refugees on human traffickers can further be illustrated by looking at the alternatives they have open to them, which is 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 paying attention to the alternatives open to Eritreans and understanding their autonomy in choosing which alternative to take. This will be discussed by looking at: 1) the alternatives to migration to Europe; 2) the alternative migration routes or options; and 3) the autonomy to choose human smugglers and traffickers. Examining the alternatives open to Eritreans is important as it shows the range of alternatives available to them and the power that smugglers and traffickers have to make them victims of human trafficking.

Alternatives to migration to Europe
Starting with alternatives to migration to Europe, these include settling in the region or staying in refugee camps. It should be emphasised that most in fact do take this option. For example, as of August 2018, UNHCR reported that over 170,000 refugees are hosted in Ethiopian refugee camps (UNHCR, n.d.). This count does not include those who have settled directly in cities and other places. Ethiopia's new refugee proclamation (No. 1110/2019), adopted in February 2019 makes it possible for refugees to work and move outside of the refugee camps, facilitating better integration (Ethiopia, 2019). Other countries which host Eritreans include Sudan, Uganda, Israel and Kenya. Uganda, in particular, was named in a resolution of the Pan-African parliament as an example of refugee hospitality, for integrating refugees 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, inadequate provision of basic needs 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 number of refugees increases, it is a challenge to meet basic needs and provide security and integration opportunities (Malole, 2018). Similarly, officials from Ethiopia have expressed concern about the inadequate conditions in refugee camps in the northern region (Gebreyesus & Schoenmaeckers, 2019; Melicherová, 2019b). An official explained the inadequacy of the services available to deal with the large number of refugees arriving from Eritrea:

> *The border situation hasn't produced any change in the number of Eritrean asylum seekers per day, which is 250 individuals. From this total, 25% 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 1,000 individuals are staying every day. The services in all camps are inadequate.* (T., personal communication with Van Reisen, 1 May 2019)

Regularly refugees have no free choice, as they are kidnapped and abducted and end up in the hands of human traffickers (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017; Van Reisen *et al.*, 2012). This particularly, but not exclusively, relates to vulnerable groups, such as unaccompanied minors and young women and men.

Alternative migration routes or options

Although limited, migration routes to other places exist. Eritrean refugees migrate and are trafficked along Southern (towards South Africa) and Eastern (towards the Middle East) migration routes. Although deaths along these routes have been less publicised, the routes carry equally high risks (Gebre-Egziabher, 2018). Legal, or so-called 'regular', migration pathways are also available to some. Eritrean refugees with family members already in Europe may qualify for family reunification. However, there are two main barriers to this: firstly, someone needs to reach Europe and, secondly, regular

migration requires documentation, and refugees often face insurmountable bureaucratic hurdles to obtaining documentation, including having to go to an Eritrean embassy to obtain the necessary documentation, which many refuse to do due to fear (DSP-Groep & Tilburg University, 2016). Other legal pathways are basically non-existent. The European Parliament recently asked for humanitarian visas to be made available to Eritreans through the new EU visa code, but this was rejected by the European Council and Commission (European Parliament, 2018).

Autonomy to choose human smugglers and traffickers

The final point of analysis is the consideration of alternatives available to refugees to pick and choose human traffickers and smugglers. Operating under the veil of anonymity, refugees do not have options, or what appears to be a choice may only be a pretence. Refugees usually have control over their own 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 negated by captivity (which involves no access to open communication), lack of food and other basic necessities, lack of access to health care, and subjection to torture, violence and sexual violence. They are no longer in control of their lives. In the worst cases, their family is not able to raise the ransom and they are left without any leverage to negotiate with those holding them. In such cases, the only option may be to follow instructions to carry out tasks to support the human trafficking operation, including by contacting people who are willing to migrate, translating, arranging transportation, and even implementing torture, (sexual) violence, and extortion.

Conclusion

Today's digital architecture produces 'black holes' – places that are unconnected or barely connected. The emergence of black holes in the digital architecture has a strong resemblance to the colonial information society, with the direction of information flows being from unconnected places (e.g., in Africa) 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 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 those in the black holes, namely, the gatekeepers of information and the gated. Gatekeepers bridge the inflows and outflows of information from the gated communities and, therewith, have the power to control the information streams. This chapter set out to investigate how the mediating role of network gatekeepers intertwines with the human trafficking of Eritreans and how the digitalisation of communication has influenced this situation.

Previous research has indicated that a lot of Eritrean refugees are victims of a new form of human trafficking, which makes use of all kinds of digital tools, particularly information and financial flows and GPS. As the modus operandi of human traffickers is evolving with the introduction of new technologies, it appears that digitalisation is creating new opportunities in the human trafficking business. These digital innovations, however, are not available to Eritrean refugees, due to stark differences in connectivity, as well as 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. They are the gatekeepers of information and have total control over information flows. However, a lot is still unclear about the relationship between the gatekeepers of information and the Eritrean refugees (the gated). Which gatekeepers introduce Eritrean refugees into the network of human traffickers, and how does the relationship between the gatekeepers and the gated evolve into a situation of total control by the gatekeeper over the gated?

This reality is 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 determine the extent to which Eritrean refugees were dependent on gatekeepers for information. The first factor regards the

alternatives available to the refugees to get information about migration options. This research found that Eritrean refugees are trapped in black holes within the digital infrastructure. Moreover, the Eritrean government controls all the media, as well as the information flows. This considerably restricts Eritrean's free access to information about migration options. The information about opportunities to migrate to, for example, Europe is provided by trusted middlemen who are connected to smugglers. This research indicates that the trafficking of Eritrean refugees is facilitated through social networks controlled by Eritreans, which have their roots in Eritrea. When human rights abuses in Eritrea prompt someone to flee, they rely on information provided by these middlemen and smugglers who have ties to human traffickers.

The second factor is the ability of the gated to produce and distribute information. This research indicated that in Eritrea, information streams are under the full control of the government. It is very difficult to obtain a sim card and citizens face severe consequences for the unauthorised use of mobile phones. Consequently, the ability of Eritreans to produce and distribute any information about migration to Europe to family or friends is severely restricted. If refugees are on the move, they are probably under the control of human traffickers, who have full control over the information produced and distributed by 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 (the mobile phone) becomes a tool of extortion (to collect ransom). 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 are shared freely across social media, are facilitated by the human traffickers. They are horrific images and sounds of torture that are produced to extort ransom from the refugees. This traumatises the victims, as well as members of Eritrean society, who resort to loans and crowdfunding to collect the money to pay for the release of victims.

The modus operandi of the human traffickers is such that no enduring relationship between the gatekeeper and the gated evolves (the third factor). Such an enduring relationship could give refugees an opportunity to negotiate. However, victims of human trafficking are handled as commodities who are passed on to different people along the trajectory who remain anonymous. Consequently, the relationship between the human traffickers and the refugees is indirect and veiled in anonymity, ensuring that no platform for negotiation is possible. The top-level traffickers remain safely hidden. This sets up a distorted relationship between anonymous, but powerful, human traffickers and their victims, ranging from Eritrea to Europe.

The research found that the Eritrean refugees have limited if any political power, either before or after they flee Eritrea. The human traffickers hold political power through their wealth and ability to operate in lawless areas, as well as cooperation with state actors involved in the human traffic networks. Through the control of information, they are able to force the refugees to enter their world. The absolute control gatekeepers of information have in new forms of human trafficking puts them in an almost untouchable position. This facilitates the human trafficking trade and protects the human trafficking organisations. Moreover, it misleads policy orientations, as gatekeepers control the flow of information, not only to the victims of trafficking, but also to those orientated to fight it.

The fact that the gated have very little control over information flows in any part of the migration process goes against the push-pull theory of migration, which underlies much 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 to Europe (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2018b). In contrast, this study found that information is tightly controlled by the human traffickers as gatekeepers and factors that may provide agentic space to act to the refugees as the gated are lacking.

The policy implications of this are that human traffickers should be regarded as central actors in the migration decisions of refugees and that those decisions are not made freely. The control of information by gatekeepers is used to force refugees into lucrative human trafficking situations to extort ransom. One approach to changing this dynamic is to increase protection by the international community and supported by key political actors, such as the African Union (AU) and EU, that gives the refugees more agency and political power, by increasing their ability to produce and distribute information freely. International protection of Eritrean refugees in countries such as Ethiopia, Uganda and Sudan and providing adequate means to communicate, earn a living and integrate should be supported. In this way, the business model of human traffickers is challenged, as 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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