

REFUGEEICT – Multi-local Care and the Use of Information and Communication Technologies Among Refugees

Since the Arab Spring in 2010 and the subsequent crises and wars, many people from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan have sought refuge in Austria, with a peak in 2015. By accepting around 89,000 asylum seekers in 2015, Austria became the fourth most important host country in the European Union. Prevailing political discourses and media representations depicting *the* refugee both as a problem and as a suffering subject accompanied their reception, thereby reducing and restricting them to the roles of “the other” and of “care recipients”. The various care relations refugees foster, including their role as active “care providers,” have generally been left out of focus.

The REFUGEEICT project addresses the urgent need to study the life worlds of recently arrived asylum seekers and refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq in Vienna by investigating the responsibilities and care relations they maintain in this specific urban context and in view of wider national and supra-national refugee policies. In particular this study explores the Internet in connection with the mobile phone and how these new communication technologies are adopted to maintain care relations across distances but also to meet care responsibilities in the new country of residence.

The two central questions of this study are: How can we understand the manifold care relations refugees are involved in? And what are the specific meanings of as well as practices and strategies involving new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as “media of care”? The study will explore refugees’ interpersonal (kin) care relations as well as refugees’ interactions with the state and non-governmental institutions that provide social services and how these realms influence each other. Moreover, it will give detailed insights into the specific role new ICTs play in these care relations.

The study will generate novel empirical findings based on a mix of innovative qualitative methods that combine ethnography with digital media studies and include digital diaries, participant observation (face-to-face and online), in-depth interviews and mapping of care relations. It will provide ample opportunities for developing theoretical insights at the intersections of anthropology and digital media studies, in the transdisciplinary research fields of refugee/forced migration studies and (transnational) care. Theoretical findings will speak particularly to the relation of new ICTs and care in the context of displacement and emplacement, a severely understudied but recently emerging research field. The output of the REFUGEEICT study will not be confined to academic knowledge building but will also have a timely and relevant socio-political dimension.