

Refugees value Facebook above most anything, may fall prey to terrorists

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Credit: Akshaya Sreenivasan

The CARA di Mineo refugee camp sits on the road between Catania and the town of Gela in Italy. Rows of square, prefabricated houses painted in shades of yellow and orange line up like soldiers, standing guard over the rural Sicilian landscape surrounding them. These homes stoically wait for the mostly African and Asian refugees who go there every year, fleeing their home countries with little more than the clothes on their

backs.

It's the future these refugees are focused on, but aid workers say the feelings of loneliness that come with lack of access to the outside world leave them vulnerable to possible exploitation by [terrorist groups](#) that use Facebook as a potential way to radicalize and recruit refugees into their ranks.

To explore ways to counteract these possible radicalization efforts, the Penn State College of Communications Information Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D) Consortium, which studies the effects this isolation has on refugees in CARA di Mineo and other camps, is proposing ways to help keep refugees from being unknowingly converted back into a life full of anguish and suffering—a life many of them just escaped.

Established in 2011, the ICT4D Consortium focuses on the use of technology or technology-related tools to bring about socio-economic development, international development and human rights. In 2013, while exploring how Sri-Lankan Tamil refugees used communication technologies like smartphones to feel more connected to their homeland, researchers in the [consortium](#) observed the refugees habitually using social media platforms—most prominently Facebook.

According to Akshaya Sreenivasan, a graduate student in the ICT4D Consortium who has spent time in refugee camps, including CARA di Mineo, that observation was a surprising one.

"We were looking at how the Internet and mobile phones were acting as a conduit between their feelings about their homeland and what was happening to them in their host country," said Sreenivasan. "We saw them obsessively using Facebook as a window to what was going on back home. They were using Facebook to stay connected to the place they

fought so hard to leave at a level we didn't even consider."

For a refugee, getting to CARA di Mineo is only the beginning. Originally built as a housing complex for U.S. Marines who were later relocated to the Naval Air Station Sigonella in Sicily, the camp is the largest refugee reception center in Europe. Roughly 4,000 refugees are housed together at the camp at any given time while they wait for their paperwork to be processed and asylum granted by the Italian government—which can take up to 18 months.

Upon arrival, they are given a single bed and some clothing, including discarded sweatshirts adorned with the logos of American schools like Harvard and Yale, and are assigned residence in one of the two-story homes, sharing space with up to 17 others. Camp residents are provided with a stipend of 2.5 euros per day from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees—which safeguards the rights and well-being of refugees worldwide—and three meals a day plus coffee.

They spend their days at CARA di Mineo idle, bored and without much entertainment, save for a sports field and swing sets for the children. While the camp's barbed wire fences and armed guards suggest confinement, refugees are free to venture out to neighboring towns to shop for goods and services, providing they sign out and check back in.



CARA di Mineo houses roughly 4,000 refugees in two-story homes. Credit: Akshaya Sreenivasan

"Most of these people save their money for the first three months and go out to buy the best smartphones they can find," said Sreenivasan. "They want to get on Facebook as soon as possible. Their only way of finding out what's going on outside the camp is through Facebook. They're obsessive about using it."

But it's not just news that interests the refugees at CARA di Mineo. More than half of the camp's residents are under the age of 30 and just as image- and selfie-obsessed as their counterparts are in the U.S.. Sreenivasan has close to 70 Facebook friends who are refugees, most mimicking their impeccably dressed Italian neighbors, gelled hair styles and all.

"They love to post pictures," said Sreenivasan. "They post selfies and updates all the time—when they get their Italian passports, permanent residency paperwork in Sicily or a job earning 8 euros an hour. They love to chat, and if they find someone who's willing to listen they will form a strong emotional bond with that person almost immediately."

And that's just what some terrorist groups are counting on. Isolated refugees in need of a human connection are the perfect targets for recruitment by such groups as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

Colleen Connolly-Ahern, associate professor of advertising and public relations, said social media opens up opportunities for recruitment these groups may have not had before.

"Some radicalization takes place in mediated spaces, and we know that social media is now part of the radical toolkit," said Connolly-Ahern. "Social media is giving groups like ISIL that prey on young and vulnerable people much easier access to them."

But Connolly-Ahern, Sreenivasan and their colleagues in the ICT4D Consortium think there are ways to intercede electronically before these refugees are exposed to possible radicalization. Working with Mark Brennan, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) chair in community, leadership and youth development in the College of Agricultural Sciences, and with funding from the Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Public Communications, the consortium is researching several intervention options, including working directly with Facebook to build checks and mechanisms that will help monitor radicalization efforts from terrorist groups using the social media platform.

"Facebook came up with an algorithm to detect users who were

contemplating suicide based on their wall posts and their overall behavior on the platform," said Sreenivasan. "We think the same concept can be used to monitor possible radicalization recruitment based on what these refugees are posting on Facebook and what communities they're subscribing to. If you look at most people who've moved into radicalization in the last couple of years, their first entry is through [social media](#)."

At the UNESCO International Scientific Conference in Paris in July, Brennan and Connolly-Ahern gave a presentation about Penn State's work with refugees and the use of new media technologies to counteract radicalization efforts, as well as proposing new avenues for intervention and research.

"Extremism and radicalization are among the most pressing conditions threatening youth, and, consequently, stable and civil societies worldwide," said Brennan "These threats may very well be the defining conditions of our age. If we do not address the root causes and factors shaping extremism, we can expect increased terrorism and instability for decades to come. The UNESCO Chair program is honored to be partnering with Connolly-Ahern and the College of Communications to develop research, programs and policy to counteract the increasing rise in radicalization among youth."

The consortium is also planning on going right to the source, working with previously radicalized refugees who have escaped terrorist groups to explore possible intervention points during the radicalization process. And while there seems to be no end in sight of [refugees](#) fleeing atrocities in their home countries, researchers at the ICT4D Consortium are hoping to move at least one step closer to keeping them safe once they're out.

"Right now we're exploring the possibilities within Facebook, giving

organizations like UNESCO suggestions for potential next steps," said Sreenivasan. "We believe that platforms like Facebook have the potential to connect and help people in need. We have a duty to explore its possibilities."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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