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Communicative Ecologies of Displaced Youth *Ways of Connecting in Protracted Situations of Encampment*

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an exploration of the communicative ecologies of young people in protracted situations of encampment. Findings from research conducted in Kakuma refugee camp (Kenya) and Za'atari refugee camp (Jordan) are introduced with the aim of building a picture of the information and communication structures that exist within young people's lives in the camps. Understanding existing communication platforms and networks adopted by the youth in camp settings is crucial for humanitarian agencies operating in contexts of protracted displacement. Such understanding can facilitate the design of more effective and targeted communication interventions that not only address humanitarian needs but also promote community development and enhance a sense of belonging among the youth. The study conducted is based on an in-depth qualitative exploration that adopted the methods of semi-structured interviews, participatory workshops, and ethnographic interviews, which were rolled out in the two camps. Data collected has been analyzed in the light of the communicative ecology framework, which distinguishes the technological, social, and discursive dimensions in the lives of young refugees in camps. Ultimately, this article argues for the importance of understanding young people's communication practices from an ecology perspective, in order for humanitarian agencies to engage more purposefully in strengthening community bonds among the youth through the use of communication. This paper also adds to the literature on communicative ecology, by introducing this framework to a new, relatively unexplored context such as that of refugee camps.

KEYWORDS

Young people; refugee camp; communicative ecology; protracted displacement; media

Introduction

Refugee camps are confined spaces governed by unique social and cultural rules, which are often the product of diverse realities where different ethnicities, traditions, beliefs, and dialects co-exist. This unique co-existence, combined with limited education opportunities, poor health services, and crime, exposes the youth to increased vulnerability. Along with contributing to issues, such as vulnerability, violence, malnutrition, idleness and trauma, refugee camps can also foster dependency among the youth (Guyot, 2007).

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This article offers an exploration of the communicative ecologies of young people in protracted situations of encampment. Findings from research conducted in Kakuma refugee camp (Kenya) and Za'atari refugee camp (Jordan) are introduced with the aim of building a picture of the information and communication structures that exist within young people's lives in the camps. Understanding existing communication platforms and networks adopted by the youth in camp settings is crucial for humanitarian agencies operating in contexts of protracted displacement. Such understanding can facilitate the design of more effective and targeted communication interventions that not only address humanitarian needs but also promote community development and enhance a sense of belonging, rather than dependency, among the youth.

The paper begins with an introduction of the concept of communicative ecology, based on the existing academic literature. A background of the study conducted, involving both Kakuma and Za'atari camp, is then provided. This also offers a brief discussion on the notion of protracted displacement, and on how this relates to the contexts examined. The methodology section that follows gives details on the methods that have been adopted for data collection, and on how these have been applied to each research environment. The presentation of findings is structured around the three layers of the two communicative ecologies; information is presented for each camp and accompanied by context-specific details that are helpful in contextualizing some of the dynamics that have emerged. The discussion section brings to light the differences that characterize the communicative ecologies of young people in Kakuma and in Za'atari; these are discussed from the perspective of a humanitarian context, in order to allow space for reflection on the role that the agencies operating in the camps have within these realities of prolonged dislocation. Ultimately, this article argues for the importance of understanding young people's communication practices from an ecology perspective, in order for agencies to engage more purposefully in strengthening community bonds among the youth through the use of communication.

This paper also adds to the literature on communicative ecology by introducing this framework to a new, relatively unexplored context such as that of refugee camps. Through a novel application of this framework as a way to depict young refugees' networked connections and discourses in camps, this article contributes to an understanding of the communication ecologies of this vulnerable group, which can assist scholars in their pursue of future work in this area.

The Concept of Communicative Ecology

Tacchi et al. (2003) have introduced the concept of communicative ecology to indicate the "whole structure of communication and information in people's way of life" (p.15). From this perspective, all types of media used are considered as part of a complex media environment that reflects the surrounding social and cultural framework, and they are analyzed both at the individual and community level (Tacchi et al., 2003). This differs from the idea of media ecology, which places the role of media at the center and examines how media provide structure to and exert influence on people's lives and society more generally (Hearn & Foth, 2007).

Scolari (2012) highlights that media environments can determine what individuals are able or unable to do. Hence, analyzing a media ecology means understanding "what roles media force us to play, how media structure what we are seeing or thinking, and why media make us feel and act as we do" (Scolari, 2012, p. 204). Man Kong Lum (2014) observes that

from a media ecology perspective, media are not neutral technology for information transmission; rather, based on their intrinsic characteristics, they define the way in which communication occurs. With communicative ecology, on the other hand, the emphasis is placed “on the meaning that can be derived from the socio-cultural framing and analysis of the local context which communication occurs in” (Hearn & Foth, 2007, p. 2). Slater (2013) also explains that the term ecology does not refer to a specific environment or context, nor does it want to indicate a macro-structure or a container in which media practices are found. The author observes that a communicative ecology is not a coherent or organized space: it is rather a contradictory and confusing landscape, which is produced by all the interactions and connections that can be uncovered within it.

Foth and Hearn (2007) have recognized three layers within a communicative ecology:

- (i) Technological. This involves the devices and media that connect people, enabling communication and interaction;
- (ii) Social. This consists of the social modes that are in place to organize people (e.g., friendship groups, companies, community organizations);
- (iii) Communication content. This comprises the ideas and themes that form the social universe and conversations of a particular ecology (Foth & Hearn, 2007, p. 756).

In a communicative ecology, agency can still be present. According to Slater (2013), this is possible if we regard agency as the overall narrative behind the connections that exist within a particular space, rather than the ability of an actor to reach a pre-defined end. Hearn and Foth (2007) have also suggested that what is of interest in a communicative ecology are different levels of media use, which involve both the individual and the community. The scope of the analysis expands beyond traditional media and encompasses applications for peer to peer social networking (e.g. social media), as well as face to face opportunities that include infrastructure and spaces for social gathering. As the authors advise, “[this] can help us to better understand the ways social activities are organised, the ways people define and experience their environments, and the implications for social order and organisation” (Hearn & Foth, 2007, p. 2).

The concept of communicative ecology has been employed to study communication in a number of settings, including urban environments (Foth & Hearn, 2007; Hearn et al., 2009), small islands (Papoutsaki & Kuwahara, 2018), migrant groups (Hoffman & Papoutsaki, 2019) and in the application of ICTs (Hearn et al., 2014; Thinyane et al., 2017). It is important to note that, in this research, the technological layer of the ecology includes any types of media that pass on information to or connect people, regardless of their actual format.

Study Background

An intricate interplay of political and social-economic factors, alongside the presence of existential threats, is typically what drives forced displacement. The primary causes that lead people to escape and seek alternative shelter are situations of violence, including armed conflict, and significant violations of human rights. These are chiefly the product of internal strife or civil wars (Zetter, 2020, p. 353).

Community disruption is one of the main experiences that refugees undergo when they become displaced. Even in instances where families manage to remain united, ties with their broader community are likely to be shattered. Information sharing plays a key role in maintaining interactions among community members, or in establishing interactions with new ones, in order to strengthen ties. Sources of information can be either mediated (for example, through the use of technology) or they can comprise interpersonal relations. This underscores the importance of developing an understanding of displaced people's information environment, in order to re-think communication in a more targeted and useful way. Communication channels can often hinder, rather than facilitate, community development. It is crucial to employ channels that enable effective information sharing and contribute to relationship-building within communities (Fisher et al., 2019, p. 274).

Kakuma camp is located in Kenya in the Turkana West District of Turkana County, 150 km south of South Sudan. Together with Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement, it hosts a population of almost 260,000 registered refugees and asylum-seekers (UNHCR, 2023 data). The camp was established in 1992, following the arrival of young Sudanese escaping the war. It is now home to a large number of communities besides Sudanese, including South Sudanese, Ethiopians, Somalis, and Congolese. Other significantly present nationalities are Ugandans, Rwandans, and Burundians. The camp is managed by the Kenyan Department of Refugee Services (DRS), with UNHCR coordinating thirty-eight humanitarian agencies operating in the camp.

Za'atari camp was established in July 2012 ten kilometers east of Mafraq, Jordan, close to the Syrian border. It is home to approximately 78,000 refugees, all of them from Syria (UNHCR, 2024 data). The majority of the camp population originates from the city of Dara'a, with a smaller number arriving from Rural Damascus and other areas. The camp is under the joint administration of the Syrian Refugee Affairs Directorate (SRAD) of the Jordanian government and UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, which coordinates around thirty international and national organizations working to support the camp population.

Both camps are protracted refugee situations, which UNHCR defines as "those where more than 25,000 refugees from the same country of origin have been in exile in a given low- or middle-income host country for at least five consecutive years" (UNHCR, 2023, p. 22). According to UNCHR, "in protracted situations, refugee populations have moved beyond the emergency phase – where the focus is on life-saving protection and assistance – but have not yet achieved durable solutions and, based on current trends, are unlikely to do so in the foreseeable future" (UNHCR, 2018, p. 22). At the end of 2022, an estimated 23.3 million refugees were in a protracted situation of displacement (UNHCR, 2023).

While a large number of studies have focused on refugees' media use in urban contexts (see Harney, 2013; Horst, 2006; Lloyd et al., 2013), limited research has been conducted on media and communication practices in refugee camps. Bellino and the Kakuma Youth Research Group (2018) have documented the infrequency of informational exchanges within Kakuma that are crucial for the youth to find relevant opportunities for learning and personal growth, and to remain hopeful about their future. Xu and Maitland (2015) have conducted a study on the information behavior of refugees living in Za'atari, with a focus on their use of communication technologies to communicate with family and friends outside the camp. The authors explain that "displacement creates a variety of information and communication needs, including maintaining connections with family and friends, keeping updated on the latest news, and staying informed for making decisions

about subsequent moves. Increasingly, these needs are becoming top priorities, together with food, shelter and safety” (p. 1). Following this line of thought, Wall et al. (2017) have looked at the “information precarity” of refugees living in Za’atari; these authors, who have studied how mobile phones are used in the camp to address this form of vulnerability, assert that precarity occurs when “information is unstable and thus potentially puts [refugees] at economic, political, and social risk that may result in them being exposed to violence” (Wall et al., 2019, p. 505). This and other work, including that of organizations such as the Communicating with Disasters-Affected Communities Network (CDAC Network, 2019) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2014), demonstrate the importance of not only understanding how refugees receive and share information, and what kind of information they are most interested in, but also on the significance of understanding this specifically in protracted situations of encampment.

The study presented here focuses on young people; more specifically, the UN definition of young people was adopted, surveying those between 16 and 24 years of age. The youth form a large portion of the population of refugees living in camps; hence, it is critical that this group is able to access information that may influence their current wellbeing as well as future livelihoods. Reliable information that one can access and understand provides the youth with a greater sense of agency (Bellino & Kakuma Youth Research Group, 2018), which can translate into community development and into a stronger sense of belonging to that community. As Fisher et al. (2019) have recognized through their work on information behavior in Za’atari camp, “information is critical in enhancing the level of engagement in community-building. Sharing information among different stakeholders helps establish a trusted community, while the information being gained equips community members to better assess challenges and seek solutions to address them” (p. 276).

Methodology

Based on an in-depth qualitative exploration, this research was carried out through the adoption of the methods presented in Table 1.

In Kakuma, the *participatory research workshops* were facilitated by this author in English with the help of a research assistant, who provided occasional translation in/from Kiswahili when this was necessary; in Za’atari, the workshops were facilitated in Arabic by a team of two research assistants, while the investigator oversaw the activities and provided regular input and guidance. In each workshop, young people worked in two groups of four using butchers paper and colored markers, and addressed three questions – “with whom?,” “how?,” and “what about?” - in reference to young people’s communication practices in the

Table 1. Methodology.

Method	Population sample
–Participatory research workshops to uncover young people’s understanding of their communication needs and media use	–4 groups of 8 young people in each camp Mixed-gender in Kakuma Separate genders in Za’atari
–Ethnographic interviews to gain insights into young people’s media use	–approximately 60 people surveyed in Kakuma, and approximately 25 people in Za’atari
–Semi-structured interviews to gather experts’ views on young people’s media use and communication practices	–approximately 14 staff members in each camp: program officers (or equivalent role) of selected agencies operating in the camp, who work closely with young people

Table 2. Agencies whose representatives have participated in an interview for this study.

KAKUMA CAMP – 14 interviewees	ZA'ATARI CAMP – 13 interviewees
UNHCR	UNHCR (x2)
Humanity & Inclusion HI	UNICEF (x2)
LWF World Service - The Lutheran World Federation	Save the Children (x2)
Danish Refugee Council DRC	Blumont (x2)
SNV Dutch development agency	Questscope (x2)
FilmAid Kenya (x2)	NRC (x2)
PeaceWinds Japan	Mercy Corps
Norwegian Refugee Council NRC	
Co Here - formerly Xavier Project	
Windle International Kenya WIK	
GIZ German development agency	
World Vision	
[Echuman Wellness and Rehabilitation Centre]	

camps. The *ethnographic interviews* were short conversations conducted by research assistants with young people in different locations across the camps, where the youth tend to gather. These brief interactions, which were recorded and subsequently transcribed for data analysis purposes, were aimed at capturing information on young people's preferred media channels, communication practices, and information sought in their daily life in the camps. In this research, the UN definition of young people (16–24 year old) has been adopted. The *semi-structured interviews* were conducted by this author. They were one hour long discussions where humanitarian professionals were asked questions related to their use of media and communication in their work with young people, and to their knowledge around young people's media preferences or communication practices within the camp. Humanitarian agencies that agreed to take part in this study are listed in [Table 2](#).

Data collection was conducted in Kakuma in partnership with FilmAid Kenya during October 2022, and in Za'atari through the facilitation of UNHCR Jordan during November 2022. Collaborating organizations supported the researcher in all logistical aspects of the study, including obtaining relevant permits to access the camps, recruiting participants and organizing venues for research activities, developing an interview schedule with partner agencies working in the camps, facilitating the participation of their staff in interviews, and providing vital guidance in navigating both cultural and practical questions around the camps.

The organizations also carried out the recruitment of young people for the participatory research workshops. Rather than directly from the organizations' staff, this was done through known community leaders and community mobilizers, who have direct knowledge of young people and are familiar with community structures and processes in the camps. Young people from the selected age bracket who volunteered their participation received a verbal explanation of the research objectives and of the importance of their input in the study; they were also able to discuss these further with the researcher, ask questions and clarify expectations before providing formal consent at the start of each workshop.

Analysis and Findings

The data analysis was conducted through a staged process, which was applied analogously to the information collected in each camp. Firstly, the *ethnographic interviews* were reviewed: types of media used, information sought by the youth and other communication

behavior-related data were transcribed and organized in a table. Secondly, data gathered from the *participatory workshops* on types and purpose of media use by young people were added to the table. Additional qualitative observations or notes taken from discussions with the youth during the research activities were also organized in distinctive categories (e.g. additional comments on the use of Facebook, main use of Youtube, etc.). Findings arising from the analysis of the participatory workshops and ethnographic interviews held with the youth were then triangulated with the answers from the *semi-structured interviews* with agencies' representatives. While most information gaps were filled effectively thanks to data collected through three different methods, data from the semi-structured discussions brought in a richer layer through the experience and views of those working with young people. At the same time, these were also useful to develop a broader picture of both strengths and weaknesses of the existing communication structure between agencies and young refugees. In sum, while data collected through the first two methods were reviewed more descriptively, on the basis of the information supplied on media use, answers provided through the latter method underwent a thematic analysis that revolved around the different layers of the communicative ecology.

Table 3 (Technological layer), Table 4 (Social layer) and Table 5 (Discursive layer) present what has been observed following the process of data organization.

Agencies utilize all the highlighted channels in their communication with the youth. A number of points should also be noted when considering this layer of the ecologies. In Kakuma, generally, young people do not have access to laptops or desktop computers. Their internet use is provided through mobile phones, who they either own or share with friends or family members. Agencies manage specific Facebook pages in the camp that the youth can access for important information and messages; young people can comment, ask questions, and often post content on those pages. A small number of agencies, and in particular FilmAid Kenya, provide young people with training and access to audio-visual technologies: outputs produced by the youth through these activities are then shared on platforms such as YouTube or other Facebook pages related to the camp. Overall, these technologies are also part of the communicative ecology of young people in Kakuma, as they are utilized to produce content (e.g. videos, images, podcasts) that informs or entertains the youth.

Table 3. Technological layer of the communicative ecologies of Kakuma and Za'atari camps.

TECHNOLOGICAL LAYER	
KAKUMA	ZA'ATARI
Mobile phone Voice calls, SMS, voice notes, video calls, emails, hotlines, Whatsapp (groups), Telegram (groups), Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Imo, Messenger, Viber, Skype, TikTok, YouTube	Mobile phone Voice calls, SMS, video calls, hotlines, Whatsapp (groups), Telegram (groups), Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Imo, Messenger, Skype, TikTok, Snapchat, educational apps
Traditional media Mobile Information Caravan service (MICs), mobile screenings, radio, television	Desktop Emails, Facebook, Youtube, online forms, Ro'ya TV page, educational platforms, Google
Print & Art Posters, leaflets, brochures, noticeboards, billboards, drawing, painting, dancing, etc.	Print Brochures, noticeboards, complaint boxes, letters
Financial MPesa, banking apps	Financial eWallet

Table 4. Social layer of the communicative ecologies of Kakuma and Za'atari camps.

SOCIAL LAYER	
KAKUMA	ZA'ATARI
<u>Agencies</u> UNHCR, IRC, WFP, LWF, WTK, NRC, Red Cross, JRS, IOM, community mobilizers <u>Camp structure</u> Security, zone leaders, block leaders, community leaders, police, security committee <u>Personal</u> Friends, family, religious leaders, church members, Bible/ Quran study groups, choir members, elders, boyfriend/ girlfriend, barber, neighbours, team-mates (e.g. sport-groups such as the basketball group, the football group, the volleyball group), shepherds, shopkeepers, doctors/nurses, teachers/head teacher, culture/interest groups [e.g. Kakuma Reading Society, Ubuntu dance group, actors group, journalists group], messenger [sending someone to pass on information] <u>External</u> Turkana community, journalists from local media outlets/ radio stations	<u>Agencies</u> UNHCR, UNICEF, Blumont, Questscope, community mobilizers <u>Camp structure</u> Community leaders, police, camp manager, elders <u>Personal</u> Friends, family, religious leaders, boyfriend/girlfriend, barber, neighbours, football team-mates, sports coach, shopkeepers, doctors, teachers, school principal, restaurant workers, drivers, counsellor, colleagues <u>External</u> Foreign delegates, university/lecturers

Table 5. Discursive layer of the communicative ecologies of Kakuma and Za'atari camps.

DISCOURSE LAYER	
KAKUMA	ZA'ATARI
Friends, family and neighbors Employment, education , family issues, household tasks, income generation , advice and guidance, leisure, dating/ relationships, business plans, future , money, marriage, career , responsibilities, disputes, problem-resolutions , community issues, food and water <u>Shopkeepers</u> Products, debt, job opportunities <u>Teachers</u> Exams, career choices , advice, promotion <u>Religious leaders</u> Religious matters, Bible studies, spiritual guidance <u>Doctors/nurses</u> Health issues , medications, vaccinations, outbreaks , counselling <u>Block leaders and security</u> Disputes, complaints, peace and order in the community <u>Sports groups</u> Team contribution, physical health and exercise, tournaments schedule <u>Agencies</u> Education, scholarship opportunities, job opportunities/career, sport (opportunities), food distribution/ <i>bamba chakula</i> (food vouchers), resettlement , shelter, security, protection issues, health , women empowerment, water and sanitation, new arrivals, "special needs"	Friends, family and neighbors Household tasks, advice and guidance, leisure, relationships/marriage, future, problem-resolutions, community issues , money, clothing, homework, training courses, school, immigration/resettlement <u>Shopkeepers</u> Job opportunities, food delivery <u>School principal/Teachers</u> Inquiries, complaint, transfer from another school, study, practice, homework, study-related problem resolution <u>Religious leaders</u> Sharia rules, good moral, Quran <u>Doctors/counsellors</u> Medications, hospital transfer, personal problems, motivation <u>Community leaders and police</u> To solve a problem or ask for help , seek protection or rescue, obtain permits, study opportunities <u>Sports groups</u> Training sessions, playing a match (organising details), competitions <u>Foreign delegates</u> Job opportunities, travel <u>Agencies</u> Shelter (+caravan maintenance), travel, aid, scholarships, job opportunities, education, complaints , training courses, competitions, voluntary work, complaints towards other young people, family problems

In Za'atari, young people have access to computer in youth centers, innovation labs, and occasionally at home. Camp-dedicated Facebook pages are mostly self-managed by refugees living in the camp; these pages provide information for the camp community, and agencies use them to pass on messages. Traditional media do not seem to be in use in the camp, at least among the youth [TV, radio, magazines and other types of public service announcements such as billboards]. Notably, YouTube is used by the youth both for entertainment and for educational purposes, and Whatsapp groups are used by the youth also with peers for study related content. "Google" was a recurring answer among the youth in relation to their use of information channels: this may be an indication of a strong curiosity to learn about different subjects, but also an interest in understanding life beyond the camp. At the same time, there was no reference to art as a form of communication.

With a larger number of agencies operating in Kakuma, young people living in the camp interact with a higher number of humanitarian professionals from different organizations. This is different from Za'atari, where UNHCR implementing partners are not only less numerous but they are even fewer when it comes to organizations that work specifically with young people. Community mobilizers are important in both camps. These are refugees who are recruited informally by agencies to carry out a number of tasks in relation to their activities, and whose primary role is typically that of either engaging the community in participating in a new project/initiative, or of passing on relevant messages on issues that may affect camp residents in a culturally appropriate way.

In Za'atari, young people also have some interaction with the broader structure of the camp, although it appears to be less about consultation and decision-making, as in Kakuma, and more about security. It is interesting to notice how, in Za'atari, youth have placed elders within the camp structure group, while Kakuma youth regard these more as part of their personal sphere of connections. Personal connections seem to be more limited in Za'atari, where young people's social activities are restricted to what is being organized by agencies within youth centers: these are premises located in different areas of the camp and managed by specific agencies, where young people meet before or after school. In youth centers, where access is restricted to specific opening hours, people can attend courses, do their homework, engage in fitness/sports activities, or simply "hang out." There is little self-organizing by young people in this camp. This may be partly due to the very limited freedom that young women and girls have in the camp, where strict religious norms are in place. This is different from Kakuma, where the youth have formed both sports and interest-based groups that are self-managed and in which many young people participate. While youth centers do exist also in this camp, the youth have many different gathering places that are used for interaction both among peers or with the rest of the community.

Lastly, Za'atari youth also have very limited contact with the world outside the camp. Due to the restrictions imposed by the Jordanian government, camp residents need to apply for special permits to leave the camp, even temporarily, and their communication with visitors such as journalists, researchers, and others is strictly regulated and overseen by the camp police. In Kakuma, young people are free to communicate with visitors as well as to reach the nearby town. The Turkana community can access the camp for business or to visit its residents. A new section of the camp called Kalobeyei has also been set up as an integrated settlement next to the Kenyan local population.

In [Table 5](#), topics or themes that are part of young people's daily lives are listed and grouped into categories based on the social modes the youth had identified during the

participatory workshops. This table shows how themes highlighted across groups are connected to those highlighted within the Agencies group. Young people's communication themes in relation to humanitarian agencies in Kakuma appear to encompass almost all of the themes present in the other categories. This shows the central role that agencies play not only in the lives of young people living in the camp but also as information-providers within the discursive layer of young people's ecologies. While young people in Za'atari appear to have a more independent agenda from the agencies, there seems to be a higher recurrence of themes around personal and family problems; here, organizations appear to be playing a role. This may be due to the significant presence that certain agencies have in the lives of the youth through their youth centers located around the camp, which are the only officially recognized "safe spaces" for young people to gather; but also to the strong emphasis on psychosocial support that both UNHCR and its implementing partners place on their activities in the camp, especially with the youth.

Discussion

The findings introduced in the previous section allow us to form a picture of the communicative ecologies of young people living in Kakuma and Za'atari camps. Rather than reflecting generally on communication and its practices, this picture is viewed from the lens of a humanitarian context. In particular, this concluding discussion on the communicative ecologies of the young refugees living in the two camps places emphasis on the critical role that agencies play within those ecologies. In contexts of protracted encampment, humanitarian organizations are key actors in shaping the lives of displaced communities, and they do so also through communication. The remarks presented below show how agencies exist within, are making use of, and could more effectively contribute to the communicative ecology of Kakuma and Za'atari's youth.

In relation to the technological layer of the camps, a relatively broad range of media technologies is in use by the youth in Kakuma. On a personal level, young people mostly engage with mobile phones and with mobile phone-accessible communication platforms and channels (e.g. Whatsapp and Facebook). Agencies make available additional platforms that young people would not be able to access or to develop by themselves. This differs from Za'atari, where young people make use of communication technology mostly independently and with no direct or overt connection to the work of agencies.

In Za'atari there is also a strong interest in educational platforms and heavy access to such platforms, which may be partly directed by agencies. The organizations here tend to rely on the existing channels in use by young people for their communication, sharing information via Whatsapp groups/Facebook pages, with limited user interaction. Young people rely also on independent channels such as Za'atari camp Facebook pages to retrieve information on activities, initiatives and news in the camp. These are managed by agencies but also by the community itself.

The social layer is a rich layer for Kakuma youth, which is also influenced by the activities implemented by agencies in the camp. The implementation of these activities is often regarded by the young refugees as a social opportunity in itself, as it offers the chance for young people to gather. At the same time, the youth interact with many other actors, either as a result of the everyday dynamics of the camp or through their self-organizing. It is

important to note that social media platforms, accessed by the youth through mobile phone apps, also represent opportunities to interact socially.

In Za'atari, though, while young people are able to rely on non-agency led communication channels, they organize very little outside agency-driven activities. This is particularly true for girls, whose movement and decision-making are restricted. Besides formal educational environments, the only locations for meaningful interaction with peers in this camp appear to be the youth centers. Gatherings take place in forms organized by agencies through their activities. Outside peer-to-peer interaction in centers, young people's have basic interactions inside the camp, and almost none outside. Hence, their social layer appears constricted.

With reference to the discursive layer, many of the communication themes in both camps revolve around young people's everyday life and challenges, and they are similar to those of young people who do not live in camps. Yet, some differences can be noted. In Kakuma, agencies have a strong presence in this layer as central actors in the discourse that characterizes the lives of the youth, both as information providers and as influencers. The topics that are part of the youth's discourse are connected to the work of the agencies in different ways, and communication here plays a key role in meeting young people's information needs. In Za'atari, on the other hand, young people set their own communication agenda more intentionally, which includes topics related to their own interests and broader information needs. Communication with agencies involves a set of themes that relate primarily to the functioning of the camp and the services offered by the agencies. Communication on personal matters seems to take place with organizations staff too, for young people. This shows how agencies participate in people's lives primarily with problem-solving.

While the size of the sample involved is limited when one considers the population of both Kakuma and Za'atari, and a larger study that triangulates both qualitative and quantitative methods can bring more accurate insights into media consumption and communication practices across the camps, this research is the first to produce knowledge on young refugees' communicative ecologies in encampment. Communicative ecology provides a conceptual framework that is holistic and helps to understand how communication occurs both within a group and between groups, moving away from a focus at the individual level or on a specific communication channel (Hearn et al., 2014). This requires shifting attention to the broader context, looking at how information flows and communication is channeled. Rather than operating from assumptions on how media and communication work in the context of community development, it is useful to form an understanding that lays its foundations on the social structures and relationships that govern that reality. For this to happen, it is critical to uncover which channels are in use, how messages are passed on, and whether other possibilities exists; this is also helpful in identifying barriers and opportunities, and in avoiding the introduction of new technologies that may not be effective in a particular ecology (Tacchi, 2015).

By understanding how young people in the camps connect, receive, and share information with others, humanitarian agencies can uncover their own position within the ecology. This opens up a space for reflection on how such positioning can be leveraged to engender a communication environment that facilitates a multitude of interactions through the use of youth-relevant technology, and that focuses on strengthening the social fabric of the reality of displaced young people. Appropriate media and communication channels (technological

layer) that drive a discourse around cohesion and connection among the youth (discursive layers) and allow new social relations to form (social layer) can create thriving conditions for community development and foster a sense of belonging in both camps. From this perspective, humanitarian organizations have the opportunity to re-think their communication programming from an ecology perspective, rather than a mere media intervention, and to reframe their communication effort through a coordinated and ecology-informed approach.

Through the novel application of a communicative ecology framework to relatively unexplored realities such as those of refugee camps, this paper assists communication scholars in their future effort in this area. In particular, the illustration of the communicative ecologies of young people in Kakuma and Za'atari camps opens up a new space for investigating the ways in which the youth shape their ecologies, both in these and other camps. While this inquiry focused on developing a picture of the ecologies, which is useful to inform the current work of aid agencies, the presentation of the three dimensions comprising these systems provides useful directions for further research into young people's agency and choices in their media and communication practices, both within the camps and with the outer world.

Conclusions

This article has introduced the communicative ecologies of young people living in Kakuma and Za'atari refugee camps. Through the adoption of mixed qualitative methods and a structured analysis involving the aggregation of data based on the three different layers of the communicative ecology, a picture of the communication and information structure of young people's lives in the camps has emerged.

As shown, the technological, social, and discursive layers of young people's ecologies carry many dissimilarities between the two camps. This demonstrates that, despite falling under a common definition of protracted refugee situations, Za'atari and Kakuma are very different realities, both for the youth who inhabit those camps and for the humanitarian agencies that operate there. Understanding each ecology is important for agencies to participate effectively in the lives of the youth and to structure their communication and engagement initiatives purposefully. This is critical especially in contexts of emergency and long-term encampment, where the youth exert themselves greatly to develop a sense of belonging to a new and often changing community.

With this framework in mind, agencies can establish a more relevant and tailored communication exchange with the youth. This relates to topics, such as education and learning opportunities, health, psychosocial support, safety and protection, life skills and resilience, emergency preparedness and response, and community participation. An awareness of the composition of the three dimensions of the youth's ecology signifies that the organizations are able to develop a strategy that is facilitated through appropriate media and communication channels, as presented in the technological layer; delivered by relevant actors, identified in the social layer; and connected to themes that are of interest to young people, based on the discursive layer. Engaging and effective communication can not only allow young people to absorb important notions but also to instill a sense of agency among the youth in their role as involved members of the unique association of a refugee camp.

Ultimately, this paper has argued that by uncovering young people's communicative ecology, humanitarian agencies have the opportunity to reframe the design and impact of their work through an ecology-informed approach. This not only places young people at the center but it also allows humanitarian actors to develop interventions that aim at long-term community building and development in realities where displaced communities will continue to co-exist. In order to further this approach, both in theory and in practice, future research needs to focus on documenting specific media and communication interventions implemented by agencies in both camps in order to assess their effectiveness within the context of each ecology.

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Ethics Approval

This study has been approved by Western Sydney University Human Ethics Committee, reference number H14904.

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