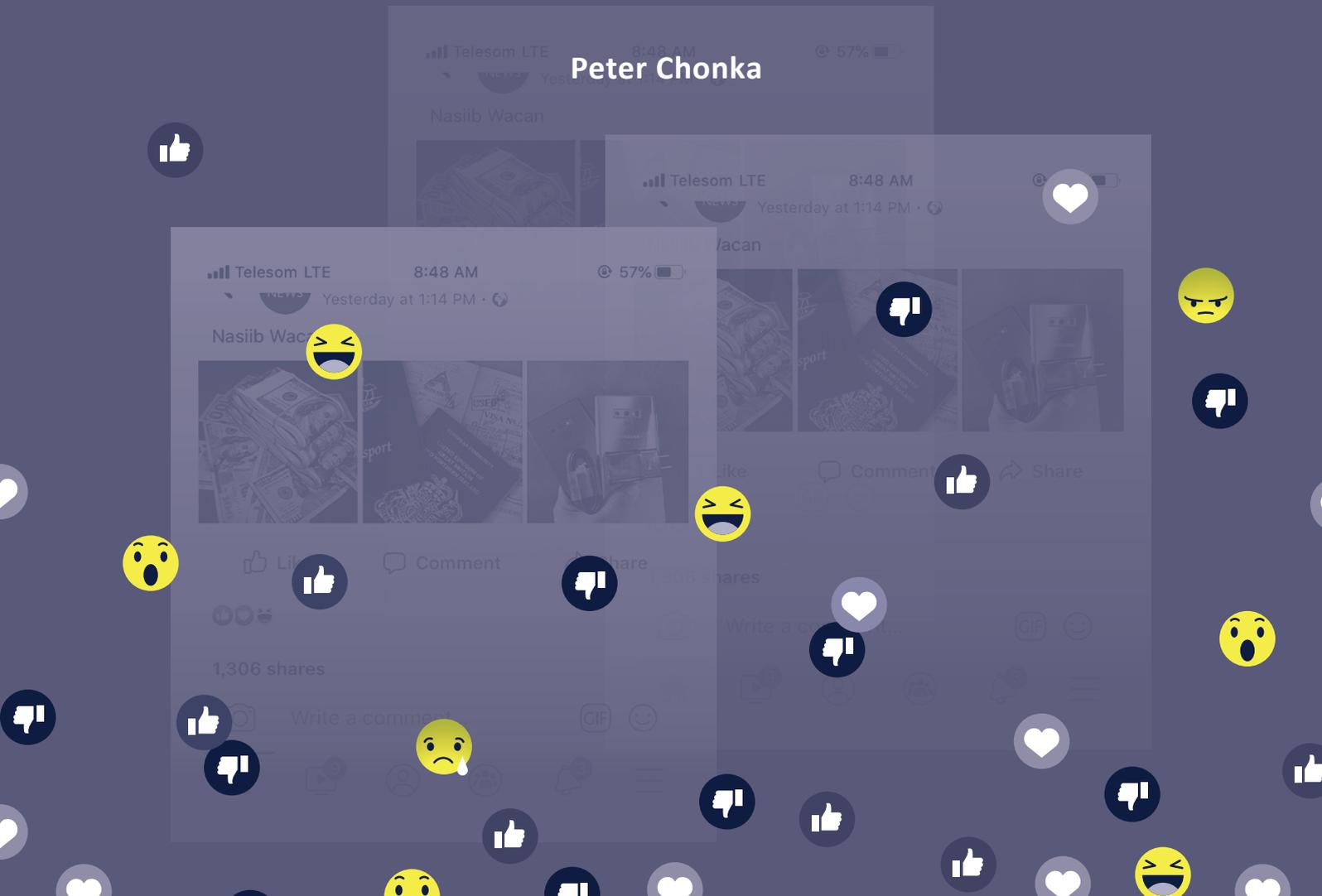




SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE TRANSNATIONAL EVERYDAY

*Mobility, opportunity and risk
in Hargeisa, Somaliland*



Social media and the transnational everyday:

Mobility, opportunity and risk in Hargeisa, Somaliland

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Executive summary

- Online and social media connectivity has increased rapidly across cities in the Horn of Africa, particularly amongst younger generations. Taking the post-conflict city of Hargeisa—capital of the *de facto* independent Republic of Somaliland—as its starting point, this report focuses on how educated young men engage with digital and social media platforms in relation to both ‘outward’ migration and ‘upward’ (socio-economic) mobility.
- Social media platforms are seen by many young men as integral to information-seeking and network-building practices aimed at securing employment or money-generating opportunities, both within and beyond the region.
- Moreover, social media acts as an everyday conduit for globalized Somali media content and worldviews in circulation between young people in the region and the diaspora. This ‘everyday transnationalism’ is shaping their perceptions of life in the diaspora and their attitudes towards mobility-related ideas, risks and opportunities, including migration abroad.
- Although some evidence has suggested that rates of ‘undocumented’ migration (known locally as *tahriib*) out of Hargeisa may be decreasing, outward migration remains an enticing option for many young people in Somaliland, particularly given persistent and widespread issues of youth unemployment. Here, social media has played a role both in encouraging young people to consider attempting *tahriib* and in discouraging such aspirations.
- *Social media practices and connections present various risks of (transnational) criminal scamming, extortion and misinformation. Such practices seek to take advantage of the social and employment pressures young people in cities such as Hargeisa face by appealing to their aspirations for upward and outward mobility.*
- The findings of the research shed light on how digital and social media platforms play into important cross-border dynamics affecting young men in urban centres such as Hargeisa. These dynamics are intertwined with wider issues of social stability and human (im)mobility and have potential policy implications when it comes to young people’s digital literacy and reducing vulnerabilities to various forms of (online) danger.

- When placed alongside wider socio-economic and political dynamics in Somaliland and beyond, these issues relating to misinformation and susceptibility to online harms could constitute forms of cross-border threat, with implications for social and economic stability in the region.
- The scope and scale of these issues requires further study, with more research needed into digital (media) literacy in similar contexts and with a wider range of young people. This report offers a platform to help inform potential policies in support of such initiatives.

Introduction

This report examines how young men in Hargeisa—capital of the *de facto* independent Republic of Somaliland—use digital and social media platforms for employment and economic opportunities, and also in imagining and facilitating international mobility.¹ Crucially, the research demonstrates how opportunities abroad are often associated with benefits that enhance ‘upward’ (socio-economic) mobility among wider family networks in Hargeisa, where the impact of diaspora investment and physical return is a crucial factor in the city’s economic dynamism. Moreover, it shows how social media acts as an everyday conduit for globalized Somali media content and worldviews in circulation between young people in the region and the diaspora.

Instead of drawing a simple line between those who migrate and those who don’t, this research provides a more holistic picture of how—in a Somali urban context—new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are shaping mobility-related ideas, risks and opportunities. The research asks two primary questions: Firstly, how do young Somalilanders make use of and understand their online lives in the ‘real world’? And secondly, what role do transnational interactions and connections play within these digital spaces and practices?

Hargeisa as a globalized post-conflict city

Hargeisa is the capital city of the independent (but unrecognized) Republic of Somaliland, which broke away from Somalia in 1991. Today, Hargeisa is a booming regional hub for trade and investment. Given the prominent role played by diaspora remittance, investment and physical ‘return’ movement, most urban Somali economies can be seen as inherently transnational. This is certainly the case for Hargeisa, which has expanded rapidly since the early 2000s with the return of significant numbers of former refugees.

Hargeisa’s downtown boasts a modern skyline of high-rise buildings, and particularly in wealthier neighbourhoods, billboards and shop hoardings advertise businesses catering to diaspora (or diaspora-influenced) trends and desires. Even so, the legacies of the wider Somali conflict are visible in the city and continuing regional instability continues to impact urban life. This includes through clan-based settlement patterns in different neighbourhoods; the continued movement of displaced people into Hargeisa; and high-

¹ The research involved 13 young men participating in several group interviews in January 2020. Participants shared and discussed screenshots of their social media use and further online investigation was undertaken by the author of specific types/examples of content raised in these interviews.

levels of socio-economic inequality, which are partly the consequence of the profound economic disruption caused by war.² Considering this, along with Somaliland's ambiguous diplomatic status, Hargeisa may be regarded as a post-conflict city.

Digital media and global Somali mobility

Global research on diasporic media production/consumption has traditionally focused on diaspora communities in 'host' countries, and these communities' connections with their 'homelands'.³ By contrast, this report foregrounds the views and online behaviours of young people in a region often seen as a source of outward migration.

As has been the case elsewhere on the continent over the past decade, online and social media access in Hargeisa has shifted away from internet cafes towards increasingly affordable smartphones and mobile internet. Recent global comparisons report Somalia (including Somaliland) as being the cheapest country in Africa when it comes to mobile data costs, and the seventh cheapest worldwide.⁴ Like in other African countries,⁵ Facebook is perceived as the dominant platform by young urban Somalis. Other platforms that featured prominently in the research conducted for this report include WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube, with Twitter also mentioned on several occasions, despite its reputation as having a more 'elite' user base.

Although outward international migration continues to take place from Hargeisa, only a small fraction of the local population has the means to travel beyond the region, whether formally or otherwise. As such, for many young Somalis a move to other parts of the Islamic world or the global North remains no more than an aspiration. Such dreams are often fostered in an urban job market incapable of absorbing the large numbers of graduates emerging from the burgeoning local higher education sector. Despite Hargeisa's outward appearance of economic dynamism, the extent of unmet ambitions in the city

2 Abdifatah Ismael Tahir, 'The production of clan segregation in urban Somalia: Historical Geographies of Hargeisa', *Journal of Historical Geography* 72 (2021): 53–62. Kirsti Stuvøy, Jutta Bakonyi & Peter Chonka 'Precarious spaces and violent site effects: experiences from Hargeisa's urban margins' *Conflict, Security & Development*, 21/2 (2021): 153–176.

3 Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller, *Migration and New Media: Transnational Families and Polymedia*, Routledge, 2013; Harry H. Hiller and Tara M. Franz, 'New Ties, Old Ties and Lost Ties: The Use of the Internet in Diaspora', *New Media & Society* 6/6 (2004): 731–752; Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff, *Digital Diasporas: Identity and Transnational Engagement*, Cambridge University Press, 2009; Myria Georgiou, 'Diaspora in the Digital Era: Minorities and Media Representation', *JEMIE* 12/4 (2013): 80–99; Pedro J. Oiarzabal and Ulf-Dietrich Reips, 'Migration and Diaspora in the Age of Information and Communication Technologies', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38/9 (2012): 1333–1338.

4 Data collected by Cable.co.uk (February 2020). (<https://.cable.co.uk/mobiles/worldwide-data-pricing/>)

5 Lisa Parks and Rahul Mukherjee, 'From Platform Jumping to Self-Censorship: Internet Freedom, Social Media, and Circumvention Practices in Zambia', *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 14/3 (2017): 221–237.

is, if anything, particularly acute. This may be exacerbated by youth dissatisfaction with the dominance of older (male) generations in a Somaliland political context otherwise often lauded for its impressive democratic credentials.⁶



Figure 1: Western Hargeisa, photo taken by the author (January 2020)

In this setting, how young people evaluate their (transnational) life and employment options takes on great significance both to their own lifepaths and their (online and offline) interactions with wider society. As will be shown, social media has an important role to play in this. Specifically, the report explores how young Somalilanders use digital platforms to:

1. Visualize the global networks they are connected or disconnected from;
2. Understand and conceptualize the (upward/outward) mobility opportunities potentially afforded by social media connections;
3. Maintain, expand and use networks, as well as access relevant information relating to upward/outward mobility; and
4. Understand, mitigate or fall victim to misinformation and connectivity-related forms of insecurity (such as local and international migration scams).

6 Megan Iacobini de Fazio 'Somaliland vote: Young people decry clan politics' Al Jazeera English, 13 November 2017. (<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2017/11/13/somaliland-vote-young-people-decry-clan-politics>)

Upward mobility, employment and social media monetization

This section explores young men’s understandings of the opportunities and risks presented by social media through the lens of employment issues in Hargeisa. It then examines the apparent money-making opportunities social media itself provides to some young people, and how these practices may have security implications in the wider information environment.

Employment

Despite Hargeisa’s outwardly booming economy, the local job market has struggled to absorb the multitude of skilled graduates produced by the growth of the city’s tertiary education sector since the 2000s, many of whom have high expectations as to what they consider suitable employment opportunities. Local employment generation is a primary focus of Shaqodoon (‘Job Seeker’, the civil society organization that helped facilitate this pilot project), and many of the research participants—drawn from this demographic and educational cohort—spoke about the difficulties young people face in gaining employment. A common narrative among these young men (and government and development actors) is the link between youth unemployment and undocumented migration (*tahriib*) from Somaliland/Somalia to Europe and the Gulf States, an issue returned to in Section II.7

Research participants spoke about how issues concerning (un)employment—including gender dynamics—are discussed on social media, as well as how social media is used to advertise and access job opportunities. Regarding the former aspect, one participant shared a screenshot of a Facebook post claiming that the focus should be on getting men into employment. This was based on the rationale that men would use their earnings to get married and start families, thereby putting the money back into the wider economy, whereas women would be less likely to spend their wages. Although the participant indicated that he disagreed with this (unevidenced) view, he raised the post as an example of popular discussions around employment issues. Such debates speak to the high levels of unemployment young men face, as well as the pressures exerted on them to generate the income necessary for marriage and starting a family.

7 Mahad Wasuge, ‘Youth Migration in Somalia: Causes, Consequences and Possible Remedies’, The Heritage Institute, 11 April 2018; Nimo-Ilhan Ali, *Going on Tahriib: The Causes and Consequences of Somali Youth Migration to Europe*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2016.

Participants also highlighted the power of social media to make visible certain types of injustice, some of which relate to the labour market and the mistreatment of employees. As one participant in the research observed:

There was a story that circulated on social media that was about an old lady who was working and broke some bones. Her boss fired her, so she sent her daughter to work in her place. The daughter told the story to another girl who wrote it down and posted it on social media, Facebook. It went viral, so many people raised their voices and the Ministry of Social Affairs and human rights organizations stood up and gave her compensation, like almost one thousand dollars. Also, someone offered her a job better than her previous one. So, if the story was not posted on social media, people would not have known about it.

A common narrative among Hargeisa's young people concerns clan bias,⁸ with the perception being that jobs are often awarded on the basis of family/clan connections rather than an applicant's skills or qualifications. One participant explained how he saw social media playing into this trend, noting that companies sometimes advertise vacancies on online platforms that in reality have already been allocated:

They advertise positions, and they say that they need two individuals with such and such qualifications. Then when many people apply for that position, all of them are interviewed, and they [applicants] become busy with it. Then what happens is that none of them are taken, and an already selected person may be recruited. The company, on the other hand, gets advantage from the people sharing [the posting] in social media. So it is an advertisement for them because when someone sees the job advertisement, he suddenly looks at the company's profile and what it does.

Monetizing social media

Participants also talked about how a small number of young people are starting to monetize social media by pursuing entrepreneurial strategies that take advantage of the content they produce and their position within (cross-border) digital networks. A young man described by Shaqodoon as a local social media 'influencer' joined one of the focus group sessions, explaining:

We are YouTubers and use it for income generation. [Public] events are increasing in Hargeisa ... We make a deal with the event organizers as social media promo-

8 Muse Abdilahi Muhumed, 'Somaliland: Youth Unemployment and Security in Hargeisa', *Horn Diplomat [blog]*, August 2017 [republished 12 February 2019]. (<http://horndiplomat.com/2019/02/12/somalilandyouth-unemployment-and-security-in-hargeisa/>); Judith Gardner and Judy El-Bushra, 'The Impact of War on Somali Men: An Inception Study', Report No. 114315, World Bank, 2015. (<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/258811492411411559/The-impact-of-war-on-Somali-men-an-inception-study>)

tion team, and we promote it through Twitter for the days the event is happening. If it is a week, the income will be based on the number of days we work for them.

Although, as evidenced above, income-generation activities may be pursued through careful ‘self-branding’ and promoting locally desirable content, participants highlighted other, more negative, strategies employed by social media users (in and beyond the region). Posting and circulating sensationalist, fake or inflammatory material on social media platforms can also be monetized, which has wider implications for the quality and tone of media content consumed by people in the region:

There are some people abroad who want to become famous or want to make money on Facebook or YouTube. They insult people in Hargeisa, Burco, Berbera, or they abuse certain clans and groups. Sometimes, they spread bad messages, and the local people circulate it in order to make money, which is a negative thing.

Other research has suggested that in certain Somali conflict contexts, local populations perceive diaspora communities as playing a destabilizing role from afar, particularly in using social media platforms to promote particular (clan) interests or negative stereotypes.⁹ Although this research did not focus on these issues specifically, the raising of these points by participants highlights the need for further study in this area—particularly in relation to the financial incentives that may exist on digital platforms encouraging dissemination of ‘shareable’ but inflammatory content.

Overall, participants expressed generally positive views regarding the utility of digital platforms for accessing education- and employment-related information (while also noting the wider structural constraints of the local job market), though this is perhaps unsurprising given the pilot study participants’ relatively high level of education.

9 Interpeace/PDRC, ‘Galkacyo Conflict Assessment December 2016–March 2017’. <https://pdrcsomalia.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Galkacyo-Conflict-Assessment-Research-Report.pdf>; for an analysis focused on the ‘recreation’ of conflict dynamics in the diaspora itself, see Idil Osman, *Media, Diaspora and the Somali Conflict*, Springer, 2017.

The transnational everyday and global (im)mobility

Social mobility in Hargeisa—the ability to earn a good living, do business, get married, ‘succeed’ in life—is often discursively linked to ideas of global mobility.¹⁰ The complexity and multi-directionality of mobility into and out of the region is reflected in the digital media environment, and the report explores how this plays out in terms of perceptions of *tahriib* (‘irregular’ or undocumented migration), as well as the wider concept of the ‘transnational everyday’ and its implications for future patterns of mobility and cross-border (in)stability.

Social media and *tahriib*

Commentators such as Al Jazeera’s Hamza Mohamed have pointed out the impact social media platforms such as Facebook have on young people’s worldviews in the region, with access to content from the diaspora potentially acting as a motivating factor behind attempts at ‘irregular’ migration.¹¹ Asked if they thought there was any link between social media and migration, several participants expressed perspectives along the following lines:

The youth in this country, it is hard for them to control their lives because they are unemployed, and are dependent on their parents. But then you see a young person abroad who is self-sufficient. It may lead you to leave the country and migrate.

Another participant talked about the impact of social media content sharing between friends separated by migration:

When a person is using social media and his friend has migrated illegally, after a long journey he [the friend] arrives in Italy and takes pictures of himself and

¹⁰ See also Freddie Carver and Ruach Duol Guok, “‘No One Can Stay without Someone’: Transnational Networks amongst the Nuer-Speaking Peoples of Gambella and South Sudan’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2020; Joseph Diing Majok, ‘War, Migration and Work Changing Social Relations in the South Sudan Borderlands’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2020; Nicki Kindersley and Joseph Diing Majok, ‘Monetized Livelihoods and Militarized Labour in South Sudan’s Borderlands’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2019.

¹¹ Hamza Mohamed, ‘Facebook Sells “Paradise on Earth” to Young Somalis’, *Al Jazeera*, 30 April 2015. (<https://aljazeera.com/blogs/africa/2015/04/facebook-sells-paradise-earth-young-somalis-150430134414207.html>)

posts them on social media. His friend [back home] sees the pictures and wants to go there. But his [migrated] friend will not tell him about the hard moments he experienced, and he only sees what a beautiful place he is in. So his friend thinks he should go there too. So maybe ... people who were already getting by in their life [in Somaliland] may change their views and decide to go.

Screenshots shared by participants prompted the group to discuss types of social media content flowing from the diaspora and influencing young people's perceptions of life abroad. While participants acknowledged the tendency of social media users to curate positive online self-images, the power of visual media emanating from the diaspora nevertheless became apparent in discussions on the topic, as this exchange about an Instagram image (Figure 2) illustrates:



Figure 2: Screenshot taken by research participant of Instagram content (January 2020)

Interviewer: Have you ever spent time abroad?

Participant: No, but I dream about being in the diaspora. This picture is among the things that pushes us to emigrate abroad ... Videos from Somali couples are posted here.

Interviewer: When you see pictures like this, how do you feel?

Participant: It would be better to be there. When you see happy young people who live in their own homes and are self-sufficient, it drives us to think about migration.

Other participants emphasized the fact that social media content from recent migrants or diaspora members was increasingly showing the *less* positive sides of migration and travel abroad:

The feeling that when they reach Europe, they are in paradise has now diminished. They realized that this was just imagination after they saw friends who migrated and the experience did not meet their expectations. [They now feel] that studying and working is how you earn a living. They say, why should you go through all these risks if you are going to work and that you may get unemployment benefit, but that it will not last long? That is why the perception of migration is changing, and social media has contributed to this awareness.

'Awareness raising' among young people on the dangers of *tahriib* has been a prominent activity among civil society groups, local public intellectuals, artists and national/international NGOs in recent years. One participant, reflecting on this, indicated that despite such campaigns the allure of migration remained, with social media content and interaction a major factor on both sides of the debate:

The influencers on social media used their powers of expression whether they are singers, poets or artists. Most of them talked about migration, but it was not enough. And the feeling of the person who sees the things that people abroad post [on social media] is still more powerful than all of this, even though people still talk about the negative effects of migration.

The young men also discussed the more practical uses of digital and social media in facilitating *tahriib*. Although none of the participants had direct experience of this type of migration, some spoke of the initial contacts that can be made on platforms such as WhatsApp with people-smugglers (*Magafe*) in Somaliland.

Another aspect of ICT use by people smugglers relates to the role of digital images, videos and messages in extorting money from families of migrants. The detention (or kidnapping) and abuse of migrants in transit countries such as Libya has been highlighted in media reports in recent years,¹² with migrants often subjected to terrible conditions and violence until they can raise sufficient funds to secure their release and onward passage. Participants in the pilot study (as well as in another research project this author

12 Sally Hayden, 'The EU's Deal with Libya Is Sentencing Refugees to Death', *Guardian*, 5 February 2019. (<https://theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/feb/05/eu-deal-libya-refugees-libyan-detention-centres>).

has been involved in)¹³ noted that images of this abuse would circulate on social media and/or be sent directly to family members in order to increase the pressure on them to transfer money:

A reason why they [smugglers] use WhatsApp is that previously you might unknowingly ignore a video of family member being tortured by *Magafe* circulating on social media sites, but now your son will be beaten, and now they are contacting you directly.

Such targeted contact requires ICTs not only for the transmission of media content (images of abuse, demands for money) but for the actual payment of ransoms. This use of ICTs and social media platforms represents a form of insecurity that runs contrary to narratives emphasizing the ‘empowering’ potential of these technologies for migrants¹⁴.

Moreover, the ways in which Somali internet users access information about these phenomena leaves potentially revealing traces. A Google search for the Somali keywords ‘irregular migration’, ‘people smuggler’, ‘money’, and ‘torture’ generates an additional list of other search keywords ‘related’ to the initial query. In this instance, all of these related queries (except ‘smuggler, Libya’) referenced a particular Scandinavia-based online money transfer service. Although it is impossible to verify whether anyone has actually used this money transfer system to pay migrant ransoms (or if so, how many), it does indicate that these search terms have been combined by users, and that there is a potential connection between these processes.

Most participants perceived that, overall, the number of people leaving Somaliland to go on *tahriib* towards Europe was decreasing, primarily due to the increased difficulty of travelling through transit countries in the wider Horn region,¹⁵ and possibly also due to raised societal awareness regarding the dangers involved (although, as touched on above, this latter point on the efficacy of awareness-raising campaigns is disputed and requires further study).

13 See <https://securityonthemove.co.uk>; Peter Chonka & Jutta Bakonyi, ‘Precarious Technoscapes: Forced Mobility and Mobile Connections at the Urban Margins’, *Journal of the British Academy* (forthcoming).

14 For discussion of wider research on links between digital connectivity and migration in (and relevant to) the region see: Peter Chonka & Yidnekachew Haile, ‘Information and communication technologies and mobility in the Horn of Africa: a review of the literature’, Research Evidence Facility, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (2020). (https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/ref-hornresearch/files/2020/10/REF-rapid-review-ICT-Chonka_Haile-final.pdf)

15 Participants’ perception that *tahriib* departures were slowing was partially corroborated at the time of the research by 2018 IOM monitoring data. This reported decreases in the numbers of migrants being recorded at common arrival destinations in Italy. Also reported in 2018 was an 11 per cent decrease (compared to 2017) in asylum applications by Somalis in Italy (and a 40 per cent decrease compared to 2016). All such statistics must be treated with caution given their lack of full coverage and the clandestine nature of irregular migration. See: International Organisation for Migration, ‘A region on the move’, May 2019. (<https://displacement.iom.int/system/tdf/reports/A%20Region%20on%20the%20Move%202018%20for%20preview.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=5734>)

The research for this report was undertaken just before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent mobility restrictions led to a decrease in migratory traffic.¹⁶ Nonetheless, undocumented migration continues and it seems unlikely that the overall dynamics of outward mobility from the Horn of Africa will fundamentally shift in the near future, even if the accessibility and popularity of particular routes remains changeable.

Diaspora mediascapes and globalized Somali identities

The author has written elsewhere about how different forms of (transnational) Somali-language media content are re-mediated through social media platforms.¹⁷ This has contributed to the development of a cross-border 'digital public', whereby media consumers across the Somali-inhabited territories of the Horn of Africa (and globally) participate in exchanges around news. For example, the BBC Somali service posts directly on platforms such as Facebook and is subsequently engaged with by dispersed Somali audiences. Building on this previous research, the current report places the focus on new forms of social media-specific, transnational, user-generated content. Participants shared screenshots of social media content disseminated and actively engaged with across digital platforms, thereby providing examples of the intensifying and ever more ubiquitous 'transnational everyday' of media engagement.

Some of these examples highlight the growing importance of 'non-professional' media producers and the use of live video. One participant, for instance, spoke at length about a famous series of Facebook Live videos from the diaspora that connect young Somalis looking for romantic/marriage partners all over the world. This dating show blurs the boundaries between entertainment and tangible opportunities for mobility. It is described by participants below:

This man connects the people who are looking for partners ... He is in Germany ... People call the programme on the number provided below. For example, if she is a girl, she asks to be connected to a man with some characteristics like a man who is not addicted to drugs, goes to the gym, is in a specific country like Canada, Somaliland, of a specific age. ... the boys call also and ask to be connected with girls ... So, this guy, who runs the programme, writes the descriptions that the callers ask in a book and later on connects those who have [things] in common ... And if they agree, that is how they get married.

Another participant added:

¹⁶ IOM, 'A region on the move'.

¹⁷ Peter Chonka, 'News Media and Political Contestation in the Somali Territories: Defining the Parameters of a Transnational Digital Public', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 13/1 (2019): 140–57.

He makes it like entertainment. Some take it seriously and marry each other while others take it as entertainment and joke. A friend of mine married a girl in Canada through that way, and she brought him there, and now they have kids.



Figure 3: Live-streamed matchmaking show on social media. Screenshot by research participant (January 2020).

In discussing transnational Somali social media, many participants also highlighted content produced by journalists who have ‘come back’ from the diaspora and are now working in Somaliland or Somalia. Diaspora-origin Somali journalists, who bring with them international media industry experience, skills, techniques and technologies, are often at the forefront of efforts to portray the region in a new light. This frequently involves focusing on positive stories that aim to influence the perceptions of international audiences or local youth who may be considering migration. These local media portrayals are often explicitly framed as countering external narratives that emphasize conflict or humanitarian crises.

These narratives can also be seen as counterweights to some of the more destabilizing transnational social media communications discussed by participants and touched on above. Here, questions may also be raised about the potential for social media content to generate different forms of instability across borders, the general level of Somali social media users’ (digital) media literacy, and their ability to identify problematic content. It is to this issue that the report now turns.

Scams, misinformation and digital literacy

Alongside the potentially ‘empowering’ functions of ICTs, there also exist a range of online practices that generate new forms of insecurity for mobile populations. These include the use of social media to extort money from migrants’ families, as highlighted above. Over the course of the research, however, a somewhat less dramatic—though also damaging—phenomenon was identified: widespread, low-level online scams conducted by (likely transnational) perpetrators. These cross-border scamming practices seek to take advantage of the social and employment pressures young people in cities such as Hargeisa face by appealing to their aspirations for upward and outward mobility.

Policy discussions on Horn of Africa youth vulnerabilities often focus on the dangers of extremist online content and terrorist recruitment. Although the cases presented here highlight a different type of risk, this is not unconnected with these wider debates about digital security. The cases raise policy-relevant questions regarding the need for digital literacy initiatives aimed at strengthening young people’s capacity to protect themselves from online misinformation.

Preliminary research indicates that young people in Somaliland/Somalia (as well as elsewhere on the continent) are being targeted by multiple migration scams usually enacted through public and private digital platforms. Examples include: fake websites promising overseas job opportunities and/or work visas, backed up by use of Facebook and WhatsApp, which aim to lure unsuspecting young people into handing over money for visa application ‘fees’; suspect educational scholarships that again involve potential students paying application fees; and purported competitions posted on social media promising foreign visas, plane tickets, money or electronic devices as prizes, with users invited to enter by ‘liking’ and ‘sharing’ the post, as well leaving their phone number and an answer to a question in the comments.

On the surface, the latter ‘like-bait’ competition posts—which may be designed to appear to originate from trusted sources, such as the BBC Somali service—are different from job/migration/scholarship scams as they do not appear designed to extract money from users taken in by their supposed authenticity. Rather, they resemble a more unscrupulous form of the social media entrepreneurship discussed in Section I in relation to platform influencers and the monetization of content/traffic. Nonetheless, aside from the public disclosures of personal data involved, such social media practices raise pressing questions regarding online harm reduction and digital media literacy. Firstly, the fact that large numbers of social media users are potentially quite easily misled about the authenticity and branding of international broadcasters such as the BBC has implications for their understanding of news media content and susceptibility

to misinformation or 'fake news'. Cases explored in the research also involved the (mis) use of United Nations branding,¹⁸ causing potential reputational damage in a wider Somali context where its agencies remain targets for militant attacks.



Figure 4: Purported 'competition' on Facebook asking users to like/share the post (and give their personal details) to have the opportunity to win prizes. Screenshot by research participant (January 2020)

Secondly, the economic implications of widespread online-based scamming in a context such as Somaliland deserves scrutiny. Recent Ponzi/pyramid schemes have shown how increased global internet access is a factor in scammers' ability to penetrate ever wider social networks and target some of the most globally vulnerable communities.¹⁹ Furthermore, Somali investigative journalists have drawn attention to the increased prevalence of Forex trading scams in Somalia, potentially extracting millions of dollars from duped investors.²⁰ The research for this report showed links between the 'like-bait' content discussed above and advertisements for these same type of pyramid-like currency trading schemes.

¹⁸ The researcher was in contact with UN spokespersons about this particular case: Goobjoog news 'No! 'UN Academy of Somalia' not UN affiliate-UNSOM spokesman', 18 May 2020. (<https://goobjoog.com/english/no-un-academy-of-somalia-not-un-affiliate-unsom-spokesman/>)

¹⁹ BBC Sounds, 'The Missing Cryptoqueen', Podcast, 2019. (www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p07nkd84).

²⁰ Harun Maruf, 'Galka Baarista: Maxay yihiin shirkadaha Forex ee Somalia?' [Galka Baarista (programme) What are the Forex companies in Somalia] *Voice of America*, March 2020. (<https://www.voasomali.com/a/5322632.html>).

The research undertaken for this report flags online scam economies as a potential source of internationalized and cross-border instability that, to date, has not received in-depth scrutiny. By contrast, academic and policy literature on global cybercrime and cyber-scramming has focused almost entirely on criminals located in the global South targeting victims in the global North. The increased penetration of ICTs and social media access, however, inevitably broadens the scope for cyber-criminals (anywhere) to target susceptible audiences within contexts such as the Horn of Africa. More generally, a further in-depth focus on (in)securities and the role and limits of users' 'digital literacy' holds the potential to produce valuable resources for local civil society organizations and international donors working in the fields of migration and development policy.

Conclusions and proposals for a future research agenda

This report has shown how young men in Somaliland often understand social media platforms as playing an integral role in gaining access to information, which in turn may lead to social and international mobility opportunities. At the same time, scamming practices and the (often transnational) spread of misleading or inflammatory content may be considered vectors of cross-border risk, and were perceived as such by the research participants. The implications of this—both economic and in terms of the information environment and social stability—require grounded and larger-scale investigation in the region.

The ‘screenshot elicitation’ group interview method employed as part of this research has demonstrated its potential value for generating further rich insights into the online lived experiences of social media users in the region. Use of this methodology could be expanded to engage further groups of participants both in Hargeisa and other cities in Somaliland and the wider region. All-female groups should be included in this expansion, along with more youth from less affluent socio-economic brackets.

Even with the small sample of participants engaged for this report, the field research generated a huge amount of data, facilitating further online investigation into the digital spaces and practices highlighted in the group interviews. Expanding the scope of the study would allow for comparative insights to be drawn from across the region and different social groups. While there would be value in maintaining a focus on upward and outward mobility, future studies could also further pursue the more specific topics highlighted in the research conducted for this report, specifically:

- The role of transnational social media content (and misinformation) in relation to social and political instability in Somaliland/Somalia;
- Young people’s perceptions of online engagement in the context of upcoming elections in the region;
- Young people’s susceptibility to online harms, particularly those relating to the disclosure of personal information and the (in)ability to identify misleading or ‘fake’ content.

Data presented in this report—alongside recent international and local media reporting—indicates that further academic and policy-focused research should be directed towards the potential impacts of online scamming. While increased internet connectivity in the region brings significant opportunities, it heightens the risk of engagement with misinformation and questionable or fraudulent financial requests. As such, it is to be hoped

that this report can inform initial conversations between international policymakers and local stakeholders about how to reduce digital vulnerabilities in Somali contexts. The organizations (such as HarHub and Shaqoon, the Hargeisa-based tech and youth employment organisations) that helped facilitate this research are, among others, potentially well placed to continue these discussions.

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Online and social media connectivity has increased rapidly across cities in the Horn of Africa, particularly amongst younger generations. Taking the post-conflict city of Hargeisa—capital of the de facto independent Republic of Somaliland—as its starting point, this report focuses on how educated young men engage with digital and social media platforms in relation to both ‘outward’ migration and ‘upward’ (socio-economic) mobility.

The findings of the research shed light on how digital and social media platforms play into important cross-border dynamics affecting young men in urban centres. These dynamics are intertwined with wider issues of social stability and human (im)mobility and have potential policy implications when it comes to young people’s digital literacy and reducing vulnerabilities to various forms of (online) danger.

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