

## "We Are Only Helping!" Volunteering and Social Media in Germany's New "Welcome Culture"

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"What is new about the current refugee crisis in Germany?" asked [Janina Kehr in this blog](#) on 19 October. Is it not just one of the many recurring examples of the "permanent states of emergency" that represent existing and long-established social and political injustices as exceptional moments in a "crisis" or a "catastrophe" (Agamben 2005, Calhoun 2010)? For me, the new thing about this particular emergency is that it is the first one that I have witnessed first-hand, as it is happening in my neighbourhood. I live in Göttingen, a city in Southern Lower Saxony that has become one of the hotspots of the refugee crisis. Germany's oldest reception camp is located in a town called Friedland near Göttingen. Friedland was established under British protectorate in 1946 to gather and rehabilitate people returning from captivity after World War II, and has served as a reception camp ever since. This summer, Friedland exceeded its capacity six times over, with 6,000 people staying in facilities built to host and cater for 700 people. When Friedland's capacities were exhausted, emergency camps were opened in surrounding areas, as has been reported from other places in Germany.

The early days of the camp saw people arriving at very short notice. Since communal administration and resources had not yet been mobilised, the newcomers were mostly provided with everything they needed, such as additional blankets, sanitary items, and shoes, through private donations. Private donations of provisions have been crucial in ensuring the health and survival of the refugees in these weeks (cf. Enorm 2015). Mainstream media have commented on the overwhelming solidarity shown by the people and their willingness to help, calling this the "new welcome culture". The term has originated in recent political debates on migration that feature programmes to make Germany attractive to well-trained and qualified non-EU citizens (BMWl 2015). Originally coined to denote the political practices of market-oriented immigration politics, "welcome culture" has come to stand for the (perceived new) civil engagement of large parts of the population to avoid a humanitarian disaster.

The current refugee crisis can be seen as an evidence of the helplessness and overburdening of the communal administration and the shortcomings of domestic politics, which have resulted in the failure to respond to this emergency appropriately and in a timely manner. The same phenomenon has been observed in many places around the world, especially with regard to health crises (Scheper-Hughes 1993; Briggs 2002; Fassin 2007; Robins 2009). In view of these failures of the state, many development agencies, politicians, and social scientists have expressed hope in human infrastructure, i.e. volunteers who would act as intermediaries between the "state" and "communities", in order to achieve healthy living, well-being, social justice, and a good life (Prince 2015).

My observations here reflect on the rise in volunteering activities in Germany's current refugee crisis in the form of human infrastructure, and pays particular attention to how social media have

facilitated the building of such human infrastructure. The study has been carried out by participant observation through online conversations in social media for several weeks, my own sporadic engagement (e.g. organizing donations and offering help), and discussions with some of the core organizers of private aid activities online and offline. During my research, I approached people online via a Facebook group called "refugee help Göttingen" (*Flüchtlingshilfe Göttingen*) and informed them about my intention to write a report for this blog. Most people welcomed my request; only a few did not feel comfortable with the highlighting of individuals rather than the team spirit. They invited me to group meetings where I could get a more complete picture about what was going on in Göttingen's circle of "refugee-helpers".

### *Acting on an Emergency Case – Digital Mobilisation and the "Realities" of Help*

Emergencies "carry a demand for action", states Calhoun (2010: 47), who points out the all-encompassing networks of media, the public, and politics, which are working together in the production of an "emergency" and the imaginary attached to it. It is a well-known fact that media play an important role in the mobilisation of global empathy by transporting images of suffering, pain, and death from "far-away" places into the living rooms of their audiences in (mostly) the Northern Hemisphere, thus contributing to the marketing of suffering all over the world (Boltanski 1999).

Recognizing the moving power of the imaginary of the emergency, one is to ask how such pictures of global suffering motivate action or how they inform emerging "affective economies" of solidarity (Muehlebach 2012) at a particular moment. The mobilisation of private help and donations for Germany's refugee crisis via Facebook throws new light on the role of the media for the mobilisation of help, the building of infrastructures of aid, and the creation of a "global moral economy of compassion" (Mittermaier 2014) within a civil society. Social media platforms like Facebook enable fast and direct communication and have the capability to link information about local suffering, needs, and activities to a wider (transnational) public, as demonstrated, for instance, by the use of social media in the Arab spring (Gana 2013; Hougbole 2013). Moreover, social media link "virtual" communications and actions to "actual" ones in the material world (Boellstorff 2008). In the case of volunteers in Germany, social media communications are linked to the (factually experienced) "realities" of help, as I will argue here. Entirely new social spaces are created at the intersection of social action and public opinion (Postill 2011). Therefore, social media are designed to connect the people's desire to help, sentiments, and solidarity with everyday life and action, while contributing to the creation of "global moral economies of empathy" of volunteering.

I am a member of several Facebook groups that have been formed to help the refugees in and around Göttingen, of which the "refugee help Göttingen", with over 3,700 members as on 29 October 2015, is the most active. The group consists of loosely joined initiatives, as the members explained to me. Their various engagements exemplify how online and offline activities go hand in hand and reflect the complexity of the community in terms of the various motivations of its members. In addition, volunteers differ in their degree of commitment as well as in their relation to the official organs of communal welfare and other associations in

Göttingen. For instance, some are ad-hoc helpers (*Freiwillige*) who were motivated to help when they personally witnessed the paucity of the standard supply packages received by asylum seekers when they were moved into private housings. Ralph, for instance, decided to support his new neighbours by looking for furniture and other items they could use in their new life (Göttinger Tagblatt 2015). Others were connected via the Facebook group for "gifts and donations" (*Verschenkegruppe*) where they came across requests by other members who were looking for furniture for refugees. Some have already been actively supporting refugees and migrants long before the summer of 2015. Some self-professed leftists ("alternatives") joined in protest against racism, having previously founded a community-based organization called "Together in Göttingen" (*Gemeinsam in Göttingen*) in February 2015. Many others were already engaged in charity work via other organizations, such as churches, on a regular basis and are now committing their time and energy to helping refugees.

Other than the online activities, there are people doing voluntary work in and around the camps. The group members estimate that about 100 people are actively engaged in voluntary work in various locations. Not all of them are active online, explained Susanne and Elisabeth. Many are too busy receiving and storing clothes and other items and distributing them to the inhabitants of the camps. Others supervise the camps, distributing tasks for the inhabitants, including cleaning, cooking, and organizing social gatherings.

In summer, Ralph, one of the group's founders who stays in Adelebsen, got notice of the refugees' arrival and informed the group accordingly. A group of 10 people came to welcome the refugees. As has been observed at other places, this group of volunteers arranged for food, sanitary items, blankets, and clothes, while support from welfare organizations and other communal bodies was insufficient or simply absent. From that day on, "the whole thing got its own dynamics" ("Die Sache wurde zum Eigenläufer") and activities increased rapidly, as Susanne, one of the administrators and founders of the Facebook group, observed (phone conversation on 8 October). Reading the continuous posts, one gets the impression that half of Göttingen's population is involved in collecting food and donations and distributing them to the camp. The number of members in the Facebook group increased from about 800 in August 2015 to 3,700 by the end of October 2015. New people are joining the online conversation every day. For instance, on 18 October 2015, as many as 140 new members joined this group in the course of the day.

The Internet provides fast and immediate help. Helpers can post queries and get answers within a few hours, as is needed in this sort of emergency. If someone needs a water boiler for a refugee, he or she can simply post a request on Facebook. Most likely, within the next two hours someone either donates the item or offers to pay for one via PayPal. Actual arrangements for payment or donation are made through private messages. By contrast, communal help by the city administration of Göttingen is slow. Money has to be spent for items to be bought; applications have to be approved at several levels before the necessary supplies finally reach the inhabitants of the refugee camps. The city of Göttingen employs a single social worker who is responsible for the entire area. Some of the locations do not see her for weeks and many of the inhabitants as well as the helpers do not even know of her existence. By contrast, the organization of volunteers and temporary helpers via Facebook represents a much-needed alternative to the slow pace of public welfare, especially in a situation of emergency.

In the meantime, welfare organizations like the Johanniter have received extra financial resources, with which they have employed some of the people who were previously volunteers. However, prior to this, the Facebook group installed an entire infrastructure next to, alongside, and sometimes sidelining help organized by well-established welfare organizations as well as supplementing communal welfare structures, and their activities are ongoing. These informal and improvised infrastructures require careful handling, as I demonstrate in the next section.

### *"We Are Only Helping!" The Uncertainties of Improvised Infrastructures of Aid*

"Are 3,400 members all contributing? Or are only a few doing the actual work while the rest are only reading about it?" asked Elisabeth, one of the administrators of the Facebook group, on 5 October 2015. In a phone conversation on 5 October, Elisabeth explained to me that she was busy most days responding to requests of people who wanted to be added to the group after checking their profiles personally to make sure, for instance, that they were not robots or members of networks with known xenophobic attitudes. She wondered whether this activity made any sense. However, the post triggered a lively debate on the usefulness of the Facebook group, the ethics of helping, the importance, use, and futility of creating an informal public group, as well as the difficulties faced by volunteers in the past weeks in Göttingen. Many members responded positively, expressing their appreciation of the continuous posts, and explained that they had already organized collections in their own circle of friends and relatives and forwarded calls to those who were not on Facebook. Others were offended by the post and felt accused. A female member, for instance, sharply expressed her anger by asking the administrator to kindly change her communication style if she wanted to motivate people to help.

Further, the debate reflected some of the intricacies of voluntary help in the refugee crisis as much as it exhibited some of the confusions, stress, and frustrations of the helpers. A young woman called Katharina, for instance, replied to Elisabeth's post by saying that she would like to do more but did not know how to get involved. In a private Facebook conversation on 5 October, she informed me that she had donated in the past weeks but that people were more or less locked in the camps and she did not know how to get in touch with them. She explained that this was important to her because her main motivation for helping was to see "the happiness of people in need when receiving help".

In fact, helping is not easy these days and Katharina's feelings of being excluded from the actively helping groups reflects some of the complexities of helping. There are too many volunteers at some places. For instance, the emergency camp at Zienterrassen, one of the middle-class suburbs in Göttingen, was already prepared for the arrival of asylum seekers and founded a committee as early as January 2015. Those in the committee participated in active help and were able to have personal contacts with the refugees, an aspect that is important for the motivation of helpers. Others who joined the group later did not get a "mandate" (*Amt*), as it is called in the parlance of the committee.

At other places, helpers are still needed. Volunteers working actively in the area suffer from a constant overload of tasks and responsibilities. Those who have been actively supporting

incoming refugees from the very first day are exhausted and stressed and feel that they have been abandoned by communal politics. Witnessing the precarious conditions under which refugees are "left to fend for themselves" in their immediate neighbourhood, many of them followed their urge to help. This help often operates in the grey zones of the constitutional law, for instance in the case of private housing of the asylum seekers. Private housing has been offered to some people with precarious health conditions such as heavily pregnant women and their husbands who have found accommodation only in tents. However, if they move out of the camp before the registration has taken place, their helpers risk a confrontation with the law and the couples forfeit their right to asylum because it is a breach of institutional law. A similar situation applies to volunteers and helpers, who can be charged for a breach of domestic peace (*Hausfriedensbruch*) for visiting camp areas like schools, particularly if the helpers' presence in some way evokes violent outbreaks.

Another problem is the management of the overabundance of donations. As of now, a vast number of items has been collected so that the restricted storing capacities have been exhausted in all locations. Helpers have to clean the donated items and separate them in order to be able to distribute them. It sometimes appears as though people use the collection points to dump what they cannot use anymore. Often, they receive dirty and torn clothes, or even inappropriate clothes like T-shirts printed with the name or logo of the "Böhse Onkelz", a German right wing rock band, or navel tops and clothes that are much too large for the mostly emaciated refugees. Some locations have stopped accepting donations despite the fact that winter jackets, shoes, and other necessary items are still needed. Repeated posts to donate only the items that are needed, and to separate them and label them in boxes, have provoked criticism and anger in the Facebook group. Donors felt unappreciated and unacknowledged, resulting in frustration

Taken together, the improvised infrastructures are highly flexible and enable rapid movement of supplies between various locations. However, they are also very unstable and difficult to control as they rely on individual capacities, willingness, motivations, and ethical assessments of the specific situation. Some of the uncertainties and frustrations with regard to this situation are articulated in the 96 comments responding to the aforementioned post. While there are people like Katharina who feel excluded from being involved personally in the great wave of help, there are also others who feel overburdened and abandoned by communal politics and officials and exposed to hatred and criticism from all sides. These comments show that helping is not only a complex (if not complicated) matter but also that it is charged by strong emotions and feelings of potential exclusion and injustice. This emotional nature of help finds explicit expression in online communication, despite the fact that the Facebook group is meant to facilitate the practicalities of helping and not to be a platform for the expression of political opinion. "We are only helping without doing politics", states Susanne in a phone conversation on 8 October.

Yet, with their swift action and with immediate communication through Facebook cutting across social boundaries and institutional barriers, the founders and followers of the Facebook group have de facto created a new political practice of help and support. They have questioned the existing responsibilities of the established welfare organizations and the communal

administration. In addition, they have, at least for a short period of time, created new forms of social inclusion and exclusion, in terms of who is considered to be "inside" and "outside" of social activities. This has provoked a number of ambivalent emotions and feelings, collectively expressed in what the members call "shit storms", as Elisabeth's post had provoked.

### *Conclusion*

Germany's new "Welcome Culture" and the rise of volunteerism in Germany's refugee crisis correspond to current global trends as the proliferation of voluntary activities and organizations have been recognized in situations where the government agencies and communal administrations are overburdened, and in view of removing social inequalities, for instance in places like the USA and Africa since the beginning of the 21st century (cf. Brown and Prince 2015). Volunteers in Germany share many of the ambivalences of volunteering that have been described by anthropologists all over the world, including their ambivalent position and the precarious situations that sometimes result from their informal positioning between various agencies of communal welfare and state politics. As I have described in this text, the virtues of compassion and solidarity do mobilise immediate and effective help, cutting across social boundaries and institutional barriers, but also contribute to the highly flexible and uncertain nature of infrastructures emerging out of these movements.

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