Social media surveillance, LGBTQ refugees and asylum: How migration authorities use social media profiles to determine refugees as 'genuine' or 'fraudulent'
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Abstract

In recent years, social media content has played an increasingly significant role in the legal processing of asylum claims in Europe. This article investigates the role of such content in Danish asylum cases by examining verdicts from the years 2015–2019. In particular, it examines cases relating to LGBTQ refugees (*i.e.*, asylum seekers who claim asylum on the basis of sexual orientation and/or gender identity) and how their credibility — and thus their ability to obtain asylum — is determined, in part, by their social media profiles. The article shows how posts and comments on social media platforms are used to prove (or disconfirm) LGBTQ identity, and how migration authorities expect refugees' online behaviour to align with their expectations of 'genuine' LGBTQ persons. Finally, the article argues that the current use of biometric digital data traces to identify refugees, govern borders and manage migration has been intensified by the application of social media content in asylum proceedings.

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Introduction: LGBTQ refugees and social media in the asylum system

Most refugees who are denied asylum in Europe are given the reason for denial that immigration authorities do not believe their stories of persecution in their homelands [1]. In legal terms, these refugees are termed 'untrustworthy', and in the asylum system they are often considered 'fraudulent' refugees; this separates them from 'genuine' refugees, whose stories are generally believed and who, consequently, are granted asylum and protection. Over the past five years, immigration authorities have increasingly incorporated social media and mobile phone content into their processes of determining whether a specific refugee is 'genuine' or 'fraudulent'. Thus, social media content is playing a significant role in the legal determination of refugee asylum claims.

This article investigates the role of social media content in asylum cases. Taking Denmark as a case study, it examines verdicts from the period 2015–2019, when social media content was examined in legal proceedings. In particular, it looks at LGBTQ refugees [2] (*i.e.*, asylum seekers who claim asylum on the basis of sexual orientation and/or gender identity) and how their 'trustworthiness' depends, in part, on their social media profiles. The 1951 Refugee Convention (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2010) grants asylum to persons with a 'well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion' [3]. Sexual orientation and gender identity fall under the category of 'membership to a particular social group'. Legally, all asylum seekers carry the burden of proof; that is, they must 'prove that they are in need of asylum'. In the case of LGBTQ refugees, this burden is twofold: first, they must prove that they belong to the 'social group of LGBTQ people' (*i.e.*, that they are a 'genuine' LGBTQ person); and second, they must prove that they are in 'real danger' because of their LGBTQ status (see also Shakhsar, 2014, who describes a similar procedure for LGBTQ refugees seeking UNCHR protection as 'quota refugees'). Research has shown that this burden of proof is particularly challenging for LGBTQ refugees (Akin, 2017; Ferreira, 2018; Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011; Lewis, 2013). One reason is that LGBTQ refugees may have needed to conceal their sexuality or gender identity in their home countries, in order to protect themselves. Asylum seekers are interviewed by migration authorities, who hear the refugees' stories and accounts for their claims of asylum. Following this, the authorities evaluate whether the refugees can be granted asylum; in this process, the refugees' social media accounts may play significant roles.

I became aware of the increased use of social media in asylum processes via my volunteer work in the organisation LGBT Asylum — an NGO that assists LGBTQ+ asylum seekers through the legal process [4]. Over a period of several years, we witnessed a significant change in the emphasis migration authorities placed on social media. In particular, we noticed that, after 2015, it was common practice for immigration authorities to ask about asylum seekers' social media accounts and to sometimes even request access to asylum seekers' mobile phones and social media accounts. The authorities would then investigate asylum seekers' mobile phones and social media accounts, looking especially for any self-expressions that could confirm or disconfirm their claims of being LGBTQ. One asylum case, in particular, piqued my interest in examining this new practice of using social media to evaluate the stories of asylum claims. A claimant, who identified as gay, was denied asylum

in Denmark because the migration authorities did not believe his story of homosexuality. During his interview, he had told the authorities about his relationship with man, whom he had met in Denmark. In the interview, he referred to the man as his boyfriend. The authorities rejected his asylum claim because when they investigated this man's Facebook profile, they found that he had listed his relationship status as 'single'. His 'single' Facebook status was interpreted as a piece of evidence that that credibly documented the claimant's story as false. However, most media scholars — as well as LGBTQ persons — acknowledge that the way in which individuals present themselves on social media (with respect to, *e.g.*, their relationship status or age) does not always reflect their off-line reality (Fischer, *et al.*, 2018; Kitzie, 2018). Despite this insight, the authorities interpreted social media presentations as factual evidence, mirroring reality.

In this article, I analyse how social media has been and continues to be used to satisfy the burden of proof or to discredit the claim of LGBTQ refugees. This article begins with a description of the theoretical framework. This is followed by a short introduction to the Danish asylum system and presentation of the empirical material. The main part of the article analyses how social media plays into asylum verdicts, beginning with a quantitative overview. Following this, I examine how posts on social media platforms are used to prove (or discredit) LGBTQ identity claims. Second, I analyse how social media profiles constitute an archive of digital traces that can be dug out and used in verdicts. Third, I analyse how gender and sexuality are performed via social media and describe how migration authorities expect LGBTQ refugees to demonstrate particular online behaviour. This leads to a discussion of the privilege — that LGBTQ refugees do not have — of being able to play with gender and sexuality online. Finally, I describe how social media contribute to a regime of visibility that demands that refugees be visibly 'out' in order to obtain asylum.

Theoretical framework

This article situates itself within critical data studies (*e.g.*, Eubanks, 2017; Noble, 2018; van Dijck, 2014; van Dijck, *et al.*, 2018), data justice (*e.g.*, Metcalfe and Dencik, 2019; Dencik, *et al.*, 2018) and queer studies (*e.g.*, Butler, 1999).

Critical data studies point to how power and ideologies intersect with data collection, data processing and data performance. Noble (2018) highlights, in her analysis of Google search engines, how traditional understandings of race and gender (*i.e.*, racism and sexism) are integrated into programming, data selection and performance metric design. She compares Google searches to 'the white, male gaze' [5] and concludes that, rather than providing users with 'neutral' access to information, Google's programming and algorithms give users a 'white male gaze' of the world. Consequently, Google performs *algorithm oppression* [6]. Along the same lines, but with a different focus, van Dijck (2014) calls into question the assumed relationship between mass collected data and individual behaviour. She critically questions whether it is possible to predict future behaviour — in terms of risk, threat or consumption — through the algorithmic programming of mass data. Similarly, in her book *Automating inequality*, Eubanks (2017) discussed the social consequences of the assumed relationship between data and individual behaviour in her analysis of social welfare politics based on data prediction. She pointed to the history of poverty in the U.S. — especially the

history of looking down on poor people and viewing them as less valuable than the middle class — and how that attitude was reinforced by contemporary social policies driven by algorithms. Importantly, she argued: 'George Orwell got one thing wrong. Big Brother is not watching *you*, he's watching *us*. Most people are targeted for digital scrutiny as members of social groups, not as individuals. People of color, migrants, unpopular religions groups, sexual minorities, the poor, and other oppressed and exploited populations bear a much higher burden of monitoring and tracking than advanced groups.' [7] Eubanks illustrated how algorithms that drive social services are designed according to social groups; thus, the system predicts an individual's needs (or risks) on the basis of data mining related to race, gender, civil status, neighbourhood and other demographic factors; consequently, individuals are not impacted by their own actions, but by actions of 'members' of their 'categorical belonging'.

Critical data studies and data justice frequently overlap; illustratively, Eubank's work can be categorised as both critical data studies and a call for data justice. Data justice links datafication and data practices with social justice. Data justice is therefore occupied with the ways in which datafication processes — such as automated and algorithmic decision-making processes in social services — influence social reality, shape subjectivity and generate inequality (Dencik, *et al.*, 2018; Metcalfe and Dencik, 2019; Taylor, 2017). Importantly, data justice approaches contemporary datafication as a continuation, rather than a cessation, of power relations; as Eubanks phrased it: 'Digital tools are embedded in old systems of power and privileges.' [8] Therefore, data processes must be understood in connection to — and not isolated from — social, economic and political conditions. Data justice recommends moving beyond existing legal discussions of, and struggles for, privacy and individual data protection. Instead data justice provides a perspective that datafication is a larger process and practice related to social justice, given that data-driven politics are often accompanied by inequalities and injustice (Dencik and Hintz, 2017; Metcalfe and Dencik, 2019).

My empirical focus on LGBTQ refugees calls for an exploration of how sexuality and gender identities are shaped via data practices employed in verdicts. Queer theory has demonstrated the ways in which socially constructed categories of gender and sexuality can be seen as performative (Butler, 1999; Halberstam, 1998). Most work in this area has analysed how individuals construct gender and sexuality through performative iterations; similarly, in this article I apply the idea of performativity to verdicts. Drawing on Butler's notion of gender as a set of norms [9], I throw light on how verdicts create a regulatory frame of gender and sexuality norms in their application of social media data to determine asylum claims. These norms are not only vital for the claimant's subject formation, but also for the judgment of the claimants as 'genuine' or 'fraudulent'.

As this article is situated within critical data studies, data justice and queer studies, it contributes to the hitherto lacking intersection between the recently emerged field of digital migration studies (Leurs and Smets, 2018; Gillespie, *et al.*, 2016; Melcalfe and Dencik, 2019) and the older — yet still nascent — field of queer migration studies (Fortier, 2001; Lewis and Naples, 2014; Luibhéid and Cantú, 2009; Mühleisen, *et al.*, 2012). While digital migration studies rarely incorporate sexuality and gender perspectives in their analyses, queer migration studies rarely incorporate digitalisation. This article illustrates the need to integrate these fields in order to better understand the increased application of social media content to asylum cases. Following this, this article also contributes queer perspectives on the increased data governance in Europe.

In this article, I use the term 'social media' as a general term encapsulating all of the interactive online media platforms that were referenced in verdicts. Social media sites are characterised by user-generated content and interactivity; thus, they mark a breakdown of the traditional producer-consumer relationship (Baym, 2015; Ellison and boyd, 2013). During the previous decade, such media have come to increasingly influence our intimate and daily lives (Andreassen, *et al.*, 2017). While I agree with scholars who are critical of highlighting the 'sociality' of sites such as Instagram and Facebook (van Dijck, 2013; van Dijck, *et al.*, 2018; Zuboff, 2019), given that content on these sites are commercially controlled and user-generated content can be capitalised, I still find the term 'social media' useful in this analysis. In particular, the term highlights precisely the social connections and technological affordances of self-expression and content creation that were referenced in the verdicts. When migration authorities ask asylum claimants for information on their social media use, they are interested in investigating claimants' online activities and user-generated content.

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The Danish asylum system, empirical material and analytical approaches

In Denmark, the asylum process is managed by two authorities. First, refugees apply for asylum via the Immigration Service (*Udlændingestyrelsen*) [10]; if the Immigration Service rejects the asylum claim, the application is passed to the Refugee Appeals Board (*Flygtningenævnet*) [11]. The Refugee Appeals Board re-examines the case — and thus the refugee's story — and ultimately confirms the claimant's rejection or offers asylum. Table 1, below, displays the number of refugees who gained asylum in Denmark in the years 2014–2019; the high number of claims in 2014, 2015 and 2016 is due to the conflict in Syria.

Table 1: Numbers of refugees and asylums claims. Source: "Tal på Udlændingeområdet pr. 31.12, 2019" [12].		
Year	**Number of refugees obtaining asylum**	**Percentage of asylum claims granted by the Immigration Service (vs. Refugee Appeals Board)**
2014	6,104	74% (26%)
2015	10,849	85% (15%)
2016	7,493	72% (28%)
2017	2,750	36% (74%)
2018	1,652	56% (44%)
2019	1,777	57% (43%)

All verdicts from the Refugee Appeals Board are publically accessible via a database on the institutional Web site; these verdicts constituted the empirical material for my research. In order to find verdicts in which social media played a role, I searched the database for references to the following platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Messenger, Snapchat, Telegram, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube. The results are presented in Table 2 [13].

Table 2: Verdicts related to social media platforms.	
Social media platform	**Number of verdicts**
Facebook	521
Instagram	31
Messenger	19
Snapchat	1
Telegram	13
Twitter	4
WhatsApp	11
YouTube	70

Furthermore, I performed a search for the keyword 'LGBT', which is common to all Refugee Appeals Board cases involving claims for asylum based on gender identity or sexuality. My search returned 180 verdicts. This does not mean that there were only 180 refugees claiming asylum due to LGBTQ+ related issues from 2015–2019, but that 180 refugees seeking protection due to persecution and fear related to their LGBTQ identity were rejected asylum by the Immigration Service and had cases re-examined by the Refugee Appeals Board [14]. As it was not possible to perform a combined search in the database (*i.e.*, it was not possible to search for both 'LGBT' and 'Facebook'), I copied all verdicts related to social media platforms into a MS Word document and manually searched them for the term 'LGBT'. The results of this procedure are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Verdicts related to social media platforms and LGBT.	
Combination searches	**Number of verdicts**
Facebook + LGBT	23

Instagram + LGBT	1
Messenger + LGBT	0
Snapchat + LGBT	1
Telegram + LGBT	0
Twitter + LGBT	0
WhatsApp + LGBT	0
YouTube + LGBT	2

These 27 verdicts were examined more closely; three verdicts overlapped, with the 'Instagram verdict' and both 'YouTube verdicts' also registering as 'Facebook verdicts'; thus, the total number of verdicts analysed was 24. Most verdicts were 1–1.5 pages long (ca. 700–900 words), though some were longer (three pages) and a few were shorter (.5 page). The average verdict length was slightly over 800 words. I examined the verdicts through a combination of content analysis (Bauer, 2000) and discourse-inspired analysis. Analytically, I understood the verdicts as discursive practices (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) of larger societal discourses that are continuously produced and reproduced. Analytically, I approached the material in three stages: First, I read all the material in order to gain a general impression of it. Based on this initial read and my research interest (*i.e.*, the role of social media content in asylum claims), I created categories for coding the material. Second, I performed a content analysis to systematically review the empirical material (*i.e.*, the verdicts). Third, and based on the results of the content analysis, I selected themes for closer examination [15]. For the content analysis of verdict results (Table 4), coding categories did not overlap (*i.e.*, each verdict was assigned one outcome and categorised as either directly or indirectly related to social media). However, with the coding of social media themes, coding categories overlapped (see Tables 5 and 6) [16].

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References to social media in the verdicts

The first coding, relating to the verdict result (Table 4), showed that the majority of asylum applications were rejected. Specifically, out of the total 24 claims, only six were granted asylum. Half of the verdicts granting asylum were directly linked to social media content.

Table 4: Verdict results linked to social media conten.			
Verdicts	**Verdict result**	**Verdict directly linked**	**Verdict indirectly linked to**

		to social media content	social media content
Asylum granted (acceptance)	6	3	3
Asylum denied (rejection)	17	6	10
Case returned to the Immigration Service for re-examination	1	0	0

Importantly, Table 4 highlights that one case was returned from the Refugee Appeals Board to the Immigration Service for re-examination, following a review of the claimant's social media use. This specific case related to an Iranian man who feared persecution from his family, his local community and his government due to his (claimed) sexual relations with another man, named 'A'. During the board meeting, new (social media) evidence related to the case was bought forward: 'Transcripts and screenshots from A's Facebook profile and from the applicant's Facebook profile [were presented].' [17] These 'transcripts from the two Facebook profiles constitute significantly new information in the case. It is necessary to carry out a thorough investigation of the bearing of this new information on the case. [...]. [Especially since] this case is significantly related to questions about the credibility of the applicant.' [18] In other words, content from the claimant's own Facebook profile and that of his same-sex lover should be subjected to a thorough examination by the Immigration Service in order to determine whether his story of persecution related to his (claimed) homosexuality could be considered true or false. This illustrates the increased emphasis on social media content that was given in these verdicts.

Social media in the asylum cases

The coding for social media themes provides further insights into the function of social media use and content in verdicts. Table 5 presents the social media themes related to verdicts.

Table 5: Social media's role in the verdict results.	
Social media themes	**Occurrences**
Social media as proof of LGBTQ status	4
Social media as proof of 'fraudulent' LGBTQ status and/or a 'fake' story	5
Social media use not changing the verdict	3
Expectation of particular media behaviour	4

I also coded verdicts for other themes that did not directly relate to social media use but were important for verdict results. By including these themes in the analysis, I was able to obtain a more nuanced understanding of the role of social media in the verdicts. Table 6 illustrates these other themes.

Table 6: Other themes in the verdicts.	
Other themes	**Occurrences**
Open LGBT identity	4
Hidden LGBT identity	5
Timing of the disclosure of LGBT identity	11

Social media content as evidence

In nine of the verdicts, social media content was presented as evidence to confirm or disconfirm the claimant's story. In four cases, such content functioned as proof of 'genuine' LGBTQ status, whereas in five cases it was used as evidence that the claimant was lying about being LGBTQ. In the latter cases, the use of social media content to discredit claimants' stories was often explained in more detail relative to other verdicts. In contrast, in cases where social media content was used to confirm the claimants' LGBTQ identity, the verdicts often lacked an explanation. For example, one of the verdicts included the statement:

'On his open Facebook profile, one can see that he is homosexual.' [19] The verdict did not elaborate on *how* one could determine the claimant's homosexuality through his Facebook profile, nor was the specific media content thought to convey a homosexual message described in any detail. Differently, the verdicts that rejected asylum on the basis of social media content were more detailed in their interpretations of social media content. For instance, a man from Algeria who claimed asylum due to his homosexuality was rejected because the Refugee Appeals Board did not believe he was homosexual. One reason for their scepticism was that, when reviewing his Facebook account, the Board found a photograph of him 'where he is pictured in the company of a woman named A, and on A's Facebook account there is a comment from A's mother, where she calls the claimant her son-in-law'. [20] Thus, in this case, the Board investigated not only the claimant's social media accounts but also the account of a woman who appeared in a photograph on the claimant's Facebook wall. The Board then confronted the claimant with the photograph and son-in-law comment during his interview: 'During the processing of the case [in October 2018], a print from the claimant's Facebook profile from December 1, 2016 is presented.' [21] In doing so, the Board brought in social media content that was almost two years old. Ultimately, this content was used to define the claimant's sexuality, resulting in his asylum case being labelled 'fraudulent'. However, it was not possible to know whether the mother's comment was correct or not, just as it was not possible to know whether the claimant could be both gay (in 2018) and engaged/married to a woman in Algeria (in 2016).

In many other cases, the Refugee Appeals Board seemed to use social media as a tool to determine claimants' credibility. A Ugandan man claiming asylum on the basis of his homosexuality described 'fears that he will be killed by his family or people from the local community, if he returns to Uganda'. [22] To provide substance to this fear, he claimed that he 'has received comments on Facebook from his family; it appears from the comments that he is a disgrace and they hope he will die'. [23] The Board rejected his claim for asylum because it did not believe 'the claimant's explanation about his conflict with the Ugandan authorities, his family and local community caused by his homosexuality'. [24] One of the reasons for this was because, 'in the light of the threats that he apparently should have received from his father, [the claimant] has remained in contact with his family via Facebook'. [25] Thus, Facebook was used as evidence of continued contact and correspondence between the claimant and his family. The Board located such contact by examining the content on the claimant's Facebook wall and Facebook Messenger, using it to discredit the claimant's story about potential persecution from his father.

Gillespie, *et al.* (2016) document how mobile phones have become essential tools for the majority of refugees on the move. Not only is the phone used to plan the journey, but, while on the move, it is also used to navigate (via its GPS and mapping capabilities) and to ensure that smugglers and others do not guide them in the wrong direction. Furthermore, social media applications such as WhatsApp and Facebook are used to maintain contact with friends and family who were left behind. Facebook is also used to facilitate contact with smugglers and relief organisations, which assist refugees with food, clothing and Wi-Fi hotspots. In fact, mobile phones are so important that Gillespie, *et al.* [26] refer to them as 'lifelines' for refugees (see also Gillespie, *et al.*, 2018; Leurs, 2017). Latonero and Kift (2018) point to the increased tension caused by these lifelines, in that refugees depend on them for navigating to safer places and accessing support networks, but governments simultaneously use them to control borders and manage migration. In order to capture this tension, Metcalfe and Dencik characterise the digital infrastructure that facilitates refugees' movements as 'double-edged' [27]. This tension is particularly clear in the case of the Ugandan asylum claimant described

above, who used the technological platform of Facebook to remain in contact with family members; unfortunately, this was the same platform that led to the rejection of his asylum claim. Media scholars have highlighted how social media is being used to maintain and cultivate contact between family members who have been physically separated by migration (*e.g.*, Madianou and Miller, 2012; Wang and Lim, 2017). While asylum seekers tend to follow this pattern of maintaining contact through social media, their connectivity can be used against them in asylum cases.

In the asylum process, social media content — such as messages, comments and self-expressions via photographs — are transformed into evidence to support or oppose a claimant's asylum case. They seem to function as either proof of a claimant's story and sexual identity or discrediting evidence, leading a claimant to be deemed 'untrustworthy'. By turning social media content into evidence, immigration authorities imbue the content with a 'truth factor' that is in no way inherent to social media platforms.

The digital traces on Facebook are ambivalent. In some cases, asylum may be rejected despite the existence of social media content that could support the claimant's story. One verdict, in particular, which rejected the asylum of a woman from Iran who claimed asylum due to her homosexuality, illustrated this theme well. It stated: 'The condition that the claimant [...] has posted photos presenting her as homosexual on her Facebook profile cannot change the verdict.' [28] According to the Refugee Appeals Board, she had presented inconsistent personal accounts (*i.e.*, told her story — or details of her story — of persecution and sexual orientation differently from interview to interview). Claimants who present themselves — and especially their sexuality — inconsistently are often met with scepticism by immigration authorities (Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011). One might conclude that if claimants do not convince immigration authorities of their sexual orientation or identity in oral interviews, the claimants' social media posts signalling an LGBTQ identity will not change the authorities' view. Phrased differently, while the immigration authorities used social media content to discredit claimants as 'fraudulent', they do not use social media content to support claimants' narratives and thereby position them as 'genuine'. This signals a potential ambiguity in the Refugee Appeal Board's interpretation — and emphasis — of social media content.

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Social media as a digital archive

It has been documented that Danish migration authorities sometimes seize mobile phones from asylum seekers upon arrival in Denmark and copy the phones' content (*e.g.*, photos, videos, contact lists, apps) (Stræde and Gjerding, 2016). Officially, this practice is performed to verify the identities of asylum seekers lacking proper documentation. In many cases, migration authorities do not seize mobile phones but rather ask for information about social media profiles, such as profile names and passwords. Leurs (2017) describes how refugees in the Netherlands fear that the Dutch immigration authorities' surveillance of their digital traces might be used to reject their asylum claims. According to Leurs, this causes concern and leads to self-censorship of the refugees' presence and self-expression on social media platforms. Leurs characterises such self-censorship as 'a harsh violence of human rights' [29].

While research has investigated refugees' digital traces in the form of biometric data — especially in relation to the EU database EURODAC, which stores biometric identification information (in the form of fingerprints) for all individuals claiming asylum in Europe (*e.g.*, Ajana, 2013; Latonero and Kift, 2018; Metcalfe and Dencik, 2019) — I am interested in the 'soft' digital traces that refugees leave on social media platforms, such as Facebook. In the verdicts, Facebook received many more references than any other social media platform (see Table 2). There are several potential explanations for this: First, Facebook is very popular specifically in Denmark. Out of the country's 5,775,224 inhabitants, it is estimated that 3,700,000 use Facebook (Internet World Stats, 2019). This makes Facebook a familiar platform for migration officials, and it is therefore likely that they are better at examining this platform than others, which they may be less familiar with. Second, Facebook is used by many refugees, because accounts and connections remain even if mobile phones are lost, stolen or damaged (Gillespie, *et al.*, 2016), and because Facebook is free of charge [30]. In the context of asylum claims, Facebook offers an *archive* of digital traces for migration authorities to investigate. This archive can reach far back in time, as illustrated by the case of the Algerian man, mentioned earlier, where the evidence against him came from a Facebook post-dated to almost two years prior to his interview with the Refugee Appeals Board. Similarly, a Ugandan man was rejected asylum because he, via Facebook, was caught lying. During his interview with the Board in 2016, the claimant said that he had never been to Denmark before arriving and applying for asylum in 2014. However, 'according to a Facebook page, the claimant is portrayed in a photograph from Copenhagen in 2011'. [31] In other words, by examining his digital history (in this case, dating five years prior), the authorities deemed him untrustworthy. Thus, asylum seekers' informal and semi-private Facebook posts from the past were treated as formal and public posts and used to determine their futures.

The use of social media digital traces in asylum verdicts contributes to the process of criminalising and categorising refugees in Europe. This process is led by EURODAC (European Dactyloscopy System), which, with its database of refugees in Europe, contributes to data-driven governance and migration management. Within EURODAC, and through their collection of fingerprints, refugees are sorted into categories of 'genuine' refugees (asylum claimants) and 'illegal' refugees (those who have crossed borders illegally and those who have been rejected asylum). This process of identifying refugees and managing their bureaucratic place of belonging via digital data traces promotes an internalisation of borders and asylum management, whereby refugees come to carry borders within their bodies and social media profiles (Latonero and Kift, 2018; Metcalfe and Dencik, 2019). It also positions groups of refugees as illegal, creating bodies of illegitimacy (Aas, 2011). The employment of social media traces in asylum verdicts seems to intensify the current process of data-driven governance and its production of 'illegal' refugee subjects. Digital traces are used to define 'right' and 'wrong', 'genuine' and 'fraudulent', leading to a sorting of asylum seekers into vital (and potentially fatal) categories of 'trustworthy' and 'untrustworthy'.

Verdicts producing stereotypical LGBTQ identities

Queer theory criticises the notion of stable gender identities and stable relations between gender(s) and sexuality(ies). Butler describes gender as performative, rather than natural:

'Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, a natural sort of being.' [32] Following this, queer theory argues against a deterministic relationship between an individual's acts (*e.g.*, same-sex sexual practices) and identity (*e.g.*, homosexual) (*e.g.*, Sedgwick, 1990). Rather, it perceives sexuality as a set of practices that is fluid and temporal (*e.g.*, Butler, 1999; Eng, *et al.*, 2005; Luibhéid, 2002).

Ironically, the verdicts illustrate how gender and sexuality are performative categories (*i.e.*, performed in asylum interviews and verdicts), while simultaneously demonstrating how immigration authorities expected the categories of gender and sexuality to be essential, rather than performative and fluid. Thus, in verdicts, gender and sexuality were expressed in two distinct — yet interlinked — manners.

Asylum interviews aim at categorising and producing 'genuine' and 'fraudulent' LGBTQ identities. Thus, both interviews and verdicts *produce* identities, illustrating Foucault's idea of the productive nature of power (see Luibhéid, 2014). Several studies within queer migration have described how asylum is granted according to fixed, essentialised and Eurocentric understandings of gender and sexuality. On the basis of their analysis of LGBTQ asylum practices across Europe, Jansen and Spijkerboer (2011) concluded that successful LGBTQ claimants must present their sexuality or gender identity in alignment with stereotypical understandings of homosexuality (see also Akin, 2017). Furthermore, in their special issue of *Sexualities*, focusing on queer migration and sexual citizenship, Lewis and Naples (2014) pointed to a dominant discourse of immutable gender and sexuality within asylum and deportation processes. Similarly, Lewis (2014, 2013) illustrated how the British asylum system regulated expressions of sexuality and gender identities in stereotypical and neoliberal ways. Shakhsari, who analysed LGBTQ refugees claiming asylum through the UNHRC, similarly found that 'the juridical discourses of asylum produce the refugee as one with a fixed, timeless and universally homogeneous identity. [...] [LGBTQ refugees'] multiple and complex subjectivities are reduced to rational and linear definitions in order to match the acceptable "immutable" identity, defined and sanctioned by the refugee law' [33].

In a similar fashion, the verdicts — and the interviews on which they were based — produced recognisable and stereotypical LGBTQ identities. They served as an example of what Luibhéid describes as 'the power and politics involved in official demands for people [refugees] to establish their identities within state sanctioned categories' [34]. In the following, I will demonstrate the role of social media content in this pattern. As the credibility of LGBTQ asylum seekers depended on how well they fit into pre-existing essential understandings of gender identities and sexuality, social media content was used to contribute to the production of LGBTQ identities, and thus how refugees were recognised — or not recognised — as 'genuine' LGBTQ persons.

Expectations of online visibility

Social media content used to establish refugees as 'genuine' LGBTQ individuals often related sexuality to vision and visibility. One verdict claimed that 'one can *see* that he is homosexual' [35], as if a particular appearance or expression could define homosexuality. In

Britain, there have been cases of gay male asylum seekers supplying immigration authorities with pornographic evidence of their homosexuality, in the form of photos or videos of individuals having sex with specific male partners (Lewis, 2014). This relies on a stereotypical understanding of male homosexuality as hyper-sexual and creates an excessive focus on claimants' sexual practices (Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011; Lewis, 2014). In the Danish cases, it was not possible to determine whether provided photo evidence on social media was pornographic, as the content of the photos was not described in verdicts. However, when the verdicts claimed: 'displayed photographs support that the claimant is homosexual', it is likely that photographs presented claimants in romantic or sexual relations with same-sex partners [36].

Being out — or living in the closet — played into a number of verdicts. It was common for successful LGBTQ asylum claimants to have argued that they lived openly as LGBTQ persons and would continue to do so (*e.g.*, 'The claimant continues to see himself as homosexual and he intends to live accordingly in the future' [37]; 'he [claimant] intends to live as an open homosexual in Iran [if deported]' [38]; 'if the claimant returns [is deported] to Uganda, he will continue to be an active homosexual' [39]). Similarly, several unsuccessful claimants were rejected because they were not living as open LGBTQ persons. Visibility has been central to Western LGBTQ activist politics since the 1970s (Fischer, *et al.*, 2018), and an integral parameter for the judgment of asylum seekers' credibility for many years (Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011; Lewis, 2013; Lewis and Naples, 2014). In the Danish verdicts, claimants who had hidden their sexuality in their country of origin were perceived as not at risk of persecution. Illustratively, a gay man from Iraq who described how he had managed to hide his same-sex relationship in Iraq and how he 'has been discreet about his homosexuality in Iraq as well as in Denmark' was rejected asylum [40] because 'he has not disclosed his homosexuality, neither in Iraq not in Denmark, and he does not intend to do so [...] [Therefore] he is not and will not be exposed [as homosexual] to such an extent that that he is [...] in risk of persecution' [41]. While being discreet about one's gender identity or sexual orientation can be a survival strategy (Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011; Lewis, 2014, 2013), the very same strategy may lead to one's rejection of asylum. Luibhéid (2014) describes how the failure to conform to European standards of visibility positions refugees as 'fraudulent' or 'not enough LGBTQ'. This leads to asylum rejection, as the lack of visibility (or 'insufficient' visibility) places refugees as not at risk, which becomes synonymous with not being 'genuine' LGBTQ refugees. In the analysed verdicts, social media played into the regime of visibility, as 'being out' and visible on social media platforms was considered an expression of one's LGBTQ identity.

Social media posts portraying claimants engaging in LGBTQ group activities also seem to have indicated 'genuine' LGBTQ identity. One claimant who successfully received asylum posted photos and descriptions of his LGBTQ events and activities on Facebook: 'The Board takes the view that the claimant is homosexual. The Board emphasises that his explanation is supported by [his] Facebook profile, where he has posted his activities [related to LGBTQ activism].' [42] These photos were used as evidence of his homosexuality. Drawing upon Duggan (2003), Lewis (2014) pointed to how sexual citizenship was understood as relating to consumption; in an asylum context, this means that LGBTQ refugees are 'expected to conform to Western stereotypes of male homosexual behavior based on visibility, consumption and an identity in the public sphere' [43]. Participation in LGBTQ events may illustrate LGBTQ identity as consumption. However, such participation requires financial resources and geographical access. Claimants who do not meet these conditions — or

claimants who are placed in rural asylum camps, far from LGBTQ events — are therefore less likely to perform LGBTQ identity convincingly (see also Akin, 2017; Shakhsari, 2014).

For LGBTQ refugees, 'being out' constitutes a risk not only in their country of origin, but also in Western countries in which they claim asylum (Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011; Lewis, 2013; Shakhari, 2014). One of the verdicts described how an Iranian homosexual man had to transfer to a new asylum camp due to the violence he was exposed to when he was outed as an LGBTQ person in the initial camp [44]. In the verdict, the incidence of violence, together with his social media posts, was considered 'proof' of his homosexuality; since he 'intends to [continue to] live openly' — and thus be visible — he was granted asylum [45]. This Iranian claimant was very visible on social media, where he had posted various LGBTQ material; he had also been exposed as an LGBTQ person in other media outlets. While online visibility constitutes a risk for many LGBTQ people, regardless of their refugee and citizenship status (Kenzie, 2018), asylum claimants are required to conform to online visibility in order to perform as 'true' LGBTQ persons. In the verdicts, claimants used social media as a tool to conform to European ideas about visibility and to carry out their intention to live 'openly'. However, this was also accompanied by risk: social media exposure could lead to persecution in their countries of origin (which would be critical if the claimants were to be deported) and violence in the host country due to general homophobia and transphobia.

Lewis (2014, 2013) pointed out that achieving the required visibility and recognition as an LGBTQ person was often harder for lesbians than for gay men, as the politics of visibility 'has a disproportionately negative impact upon lesbian asylum seekers' [46]. While it is not possible to draw a general conclusion about gender in relation to the verdicts, it is notable that all claimants who obtained asylum in the analysed verdicts were gay (cis)men.

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Expectations of temporality

The verdicts displayed an expectation of particular media behaviour, which pertained to the ways in which social media content contributed to stereotypical understandings of gender identity and sexuality. A common stereotype of gender identity and sexual orientation is that one 'is born with it'; this underlying idea of sexuality as inherent and essential was evidenced in the verdicts. During the interviews, the Refugee Appeals Board asked claimants questions about their childhood and teenage years; the claimants spoke of 'feeling different' from an early age, reverberating with the Board's understanding of sexuality as linear, fixed and binary (heterosexuality vs. homosexuality) (see also Shakhsari, 2014).

The immigration officials seem to have expected a similar linear and fixed expression of sexuality in claimants' social media profiles. This expectation was temporal, as the Refugee Appeals Board seemed to expect LGBTQ asylum seekers to post 'LGBTQ material' on their social media accounts from the moment they submitted their asylum claims, if not earlier. Successful claimants posted 'LGBTQ material' on social media throughout their asylum application process, whereas claimants who were denied asylum either did not post 'LGBTQ material' or only did so late in their application process. Illustratively, one Ugandan man 'who fears being killed by the local community and the Ugandan government because he is homosexual' [47] was denied asylum; in the verdict, the Board wrote: 'It is noticeable that

the claimant argues that he does not use his Facebook profile to express his sexual orientation.' [48] In other words, the Board expected him — as a 'genuine' homosexual — to express his sexual orientation on social media. The Ugandan man's lack of social media exposure seems to have counted against his credibility. Similarly, a woman from Iran posted 'LGBTQ material' on her Facebook profile, but only late in her asylum process, after she was denied asylum by the Immigration Service; thus, her posts did not carry the same credibility as if she had posted them earlier in her application process [49]. Finally, the Refugee Appeals Board found it suspect that a male claimant from Iran had created a Facebook profile and begun posting 'LGBTQ material' that supported his asylum claim only late in his asylum process: 'It is noticeable that the claimant's Facebook profile is created in the beginning of 2017 after he was denied asylum.' [50]

This assumption — that 'genuine' LGBTQ people express their sexuality and gender identification online — calls to mind what van Dijck (2014) terms *dataism*, which assumes a linear and correlative relationship between data and individuals. Critical data studies (*e.g.*, Dencik, *et al.*, 2018; Eubanks, 2017) highlight the injustice of dataism, including the governmental or corporate use of (algorithmically processed) data to anticipate future behaviour. One example of an injustice engendered by dataism is that citizens are digitally scrutinised as members of social groups, rather than as individuals. Accordingly, the algorithms that drive social services or insurance policies (*i.e.*, automated decision-making processes) are designed according to pre-existing data mining, resulting in individuals being affected by the actions of social categories, rather than their unique personal histories (see also O'Neil, 2016). While this algorithm processing and its aim of prediction is different from the Board's assessment of social media, there seems to be a parallel in the way LGBTQ refugees are affected by — and measured against — expectations and predictions based on the prior actions of other LGBTQ people, as if a correlative relationship existed between LGBTQ identity and social media behaviour.

Research has documented that LGBTQ claimants who share their sexuality or gender identity late in the asylum process risked being deemed untrustworthy (Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011; Lewis, 2013). This pattern was clear in the verdicts, where the 'timing of the disclosure of LGBT identity' played into 11 verdicts. In these verdicts, claimants were not considered 'genuine' LGBTQ people because they did not share their LGBTQ status in the initial phase of the application process. The use of social media to judge asylum claims seems to reinforce this pattern of determining refugees' credibility on the basis of the time at which they disclose their sexuality or gender identity during the application process. Just as claimants are expected to share their sexuality and gender identity early in the process, they are also expected to post 'LGBTQ material' in the initial stages of their application.

In the verdicts, the Refugee Appeals Board also displayed another temporal expectation relating to social media — namely, an expectancy of immediacy. Baym (2015) underscores that 'temporal structures' and 'synchronous communication' have become central characteristics of digital social media. While social media enables the rapid transmission of information, users may not always engage in immediate communication. In a verdict rejecting asylum for a male claimant from Egypt, the Board did not believe the claimant's narrative due to a lack of social media immediacy. The claimant had married a Danish man in the spring of 2015, and he posted information about his marriage on Facebook. In 2016, the claimant received threats via online media from his father, who had seen his son's post about his marriage and disapproved of his homosexuality. The Board found it strange that the father had not reacted sooner, since information about his son's homosexuality had been displayed

on social media since 2015. Here, the father's lack of immediate response, which was technologically possible, contributed to undermining the claimant's credibility.

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The privilege of being able to play with sexuality and gender on social media

A tenet of online interactions is that users may enact different online personas than their off-line self. The early days of Internet scholarship celebrated 'cyberspace' as a potential utopia for fluid disembodied identities (*e.g.*, Stone, 1995; see also Bromseth and Sundén, 2010), and described how online spaces invited the creation of 'alternative selves' (boyd, 2006; Turkle, 1984). This optimistic position was quickly accompanied by criticism of how bodily identities were sometimes reinforced or presented via stereotypes through technological affordances (*e.g.*, Kendall, 1998; Nakamura, 2002, 1995; Sundén, 2003). Despite these limitations, a number of scholars documented how LGBTQ persons used online media to express gender fluidity and to 'experiment' with gender identities and sexual practices. Raun (2016) described how transgender vloggers use YouTube to visualise their transition and create community; here, the transition itself, rather than a fixed identity, was in focus. Kinzie (2018) illustrated how LGBTQ youth, despite affordances that constrain their expressions of gender and sexuality, used social media to perform and negotiate identities in relation to their LGBTQ positions. Importantly, Kenzie demonstrated how social media provided new possibilities for gender and sexual expression that off-line life could not offer. Haimson, *et al.* (2015) described how identity markers (*i.e.*, gender, age, name, etc.) were often flexible in online settings, thereby enabling an exploration of identity (see also Fischer, *et al.* 2018). Similarly, O'Riordan (2007) provided examples of how online performances contributed to understandings of gender and identity as fluid and experimental.

Unfortunately, fluidity and experimentation on social media was not possible for Danish asylum claimants. Given the Refugee Appeals Board aim of investigating claimants' social media accounts in order to categorise them as 'genuine' or 'fraudulent' LGBTQ refugees, the claimants had no opportunity to express ambivalence. Any content that could potentially associate them with heterosexuality (*e.g.*, expressions of a fluid sexuality) typically led to their determination as 'fraudulent'. Dencik, *et al.* argued that 'the politics of categorisation and classification that is inherent to datafication creates new forms of oppression' [51]. While they pointed to the injustice of individual identity and agency disappearing within algorithmic processes, their argument is relevant here, as immigration authorities' surveillance of social media oppressed LGBTQ persons' experimental expression and self-representations on social media. The privilege of experimenting with gender identity and sexuality — and, in particular, the ability to express oneself ambivalently — seemed reserved for persons with secure residence permits and citizenship in Europe. Similarly, individual agency in designing one's online gender and sexuality performance disappeared (or was reduced) when one's online postings related to gender and sexuality became evidence of 'truth' or 'fraud'.

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Conclusion

This article examined the role of social media in Danish asylum verdicts. It has described how LGBTQ asylum claimants' social media profiles and posts contributed to their categorisation as 'genuine' or 'fraudulent' refugees, and how social media content was used to satisfy or weaken their burden of proof by positioning them as 'genuine' or 'fraudulent' LGBTQ persons. The article aimed at bridging digital migration studies and queer migration studies by incorporating sexuality and gender perspectives into an analysis of the data used for refugee management and governance. It also aimed at contributing perspectives of data and social media to the literature on LGBTQ migrants and asylum systems. The article documented how the existing processes of identifying refugees via digital data traces and governing borders and migration using data (Latonero and Kift, 2018; Metcalfe and Dencik, 2019) was intensified by the application of social media content to asylum verdicts. Similar to the ways in which personal biometric data traces function at border crossings, personal social media traces have become a means of obtaining asylum. This article highlighted how particular content, such as Facebook comments and photographic posts, could enable refugees to obtain asylum (or not). While mobile phones have been described as tools of surveillance, identification and categorisation (*e.g.*, Leurs and Smet, 2018), this article demonstrated how social media content also contributed to identification and categorisation by differentiating LGBTQ refugees as 'genuine' or 'fraudulent' LGBTQ persons, and thereby 'genuine' or 'fraudulent' refugees. The application of social media content to asylum processes contributes to strengthening existing datafied border regimes and data-driven governance. It also leads to an 'internalisation' of borders (Metcalfe and Dencik, 2019), whereby refugees' personal and private social media profiles determine their status of belonging.

Importantly, this article has shown how social media content has been used as evidence in asylum cases, confirming or disconfirming claimants' credibility. In this context, media content was interpreted as 'fact', carrying a 'truth factor' seldom attributed to social media. One reason for this is that social media are integrated into asylum interviews and asylum processes, which aim at determining (and producing) 'genuine' versus 'fraudulent' LGBTQ identities. Thus, social media content functions as evidence of identity, which forms the basis of the verdict; in order for an identity to be recognised as 'genuinely' LGBTQ, it must conform to Eurocentric and stereotypical understandings of gender and sexuality. Central to this understanding of LGBTQ identity is visibility and being 'out', which is thought to involve social media posts relating to LGBTQ content and activities. Despite the potential danger that such online 'outing' implies, claimants were expected to do so as early as the initial stages of the asylum process. In this way, social media was used as a tool to express and measure claimants' visibility, upholding the stereotypical understanding of visibility as a central characteristic of LGBTQ identity.

The employment of social media in asylum verdicts contributes to data injustice. While queer theory has demonstrated how gender and sexuality are performative and fluid, LGBTQ refugees do not have the privilege of expressing this fluidity. In the verdicts, there was no space for ambiguity or transitions over time; rather, social media profiles were reviewed as archival traces that 'fixed' claimants' sexuality and gender identities.

This article aligns itself with critical data studies by highlighting the social injustices accompanying increased datafication and data-driven governance. The central point is not simply the violation of privacy that occurs when migration authorities review refugees mobile phones and social media profiles; rather, it is that such surveillance contributes to data-driven decision-making processes as part of larger political processes. Verdicts driven by social

media must be understood as supporting a larger political agenda manifesting in increased data-driven migration management and border control — an agenda that aims at dividing migrants into categories of 'genuine' and 'fraudulent' refugees, in order to deport as many of them as possible. [FM]

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Notes

1. I deliberately use the term 'refugees' for all asylum seekers, in order to avoid the (often politically motivated) division between 'refugees' and 'immigrants', as this distinction indicates a hierarchy, implying that some people ('immigrants') migrate for the 'wrong' reasons.

2. LGBTQ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer.

3. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2010, p. 4.

4. https://lgbtasylum.dk/.

5. Noble, 2018, p. 59.

6. Noble, 2018, p. 4.

7. Eubanks, 2017, p. 6.

8. Eubanks, 2017, p. 178.

9. Butler, 1998, p. 29.

10. https://uim.dk/udlaendingestyrelsen.

11. https://fln.dk/da/English.

12. Udlændinge– og Integrationsministeriet, at https://uim.dk/filer/indrejse-og-ophold/tal-pa-udlaendingeomradet/2019/tal-paa-udlaendingeomraadet-31-dec-2019.pdf.

13. https://fln.dk/Global/Soegeresultater.aspx. All searches were performed in early March 2020 (4–5 March 2020).

14. I applied for access to the Immigration Service's verdicts related to LGBTQ+ claims for asylum, but I was denied access.

15. Differently from traditional content analysis, I did not methodologically divide the material into smaller coding units, but approached each verdict as a (large) unit and coded the parts that were relevant to the use of social media in the legal deliberation. While my methodological approach might be understood as quantitative content analysis followed by qualitative discourse analysis, I understood it as a continuous analytical process of interpreting empirical data. Instead of drawing a clear line between the quantitative and qualitative content analyses (*e.g.*, George, 2008), my approach was a systematic (quantitatively-inspired) method of (qualitatively) understanding and interpreting the empirical data that both provided an overview and facilitated an in-depth analysis of the material.

16. To investigate the role of social media content in the asylum cases, I coded the empirical material according to: 'verdict result', 'social media themes' and 'other themes'. Themes were further divided into subthemes. While traditional content analysis recommends that coding categories should not overlap and that each coding unit should be coded only once (*e.g.*, Bauer, 2000), I allowed my categories to overlap and for some individual verdicts to be coded to more than one theme. In doing so, I was able to generate more nuanced understandings of the ways in which social media content was used in complex — and potentially contradictory — ways in the verdicts. Finally, with respect to the other themes category, each verdict was coded only once (*i.e.*, a verdict describing the same theme several times was coded as a single occurrence of that theme).

17. Iran/2017/13/JOL is the Refugee Appeals Board identification code for the verdict. This verdict, as well as all other verdicts referenced in this article, can be found here: https://fln.dk/Global/Soegeresultater.aspx. All citations were translated from Danish to English.

18. Iran/2017/13/JOL.

19. Afgh/2017/169/CHA.

20. Alge/2018/6/EMU.

21. Alge/2018/6/EMU.

22. Ugan/2019/6/CRT.

23. Ugan/2019/6/CRT.

24. Ugan/2019/6/CRT.

25. Ugan/2019/6/CRT.

26. Gillespie, *et al.*, 2016, p. 43.

27. Metcalfe and Dencik, 2019, p. 5.

28. Iran/2018/177/LINB.

29. Leurs, 2017, p. 692.

30. Use of Facebook is not completely free of cost, as one pays with one's data, which Facebook tracks and capitalises (van Dijck, 2013).

31. Ugan/2016/1/STR.

32. Butler, 1999, p. 43 ff.

33. Shakhsari, 2014, p. 1,002.

34. Luibhéid, 2014, p. 1,035.

35. Afgh/2017/169/CHA, my emphasis.

36. Ugan/2016/4/IBL.

37. Afgh/2017/169/CHA.

38. Iran/2019/20/MNR.

39. Ugan/2016/4/IBL.

40. Irak/2017/156/nke (sic).

41. Irak/2017/156/nke.

42. Iran/2028/357/MJM.

43. Lewis, 2014, p. 962.

44. In Denmark, refugees are assigned residence in asylum camps while their cases are processed.

45. Iran/2018/357/MJM.

46. Lewis, 2014, p. 965.

47. Ugan/2018/4/JAH.

48. Ugan/2018/4/JAH.

49. Iran/2018/177/LINB.

50. Iran/2017/254/SOL.

51. Dencik, *et al.*, 2018, p. 7.

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Editorial history