

## MOBILIZING GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE: REFUGEE RESEARCH IN AN AGE OF DISPLACEMENT

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ISBN 978-1-77385-086-3

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# New, Emerging, Emerged? Navigating Agency, Technology, and Organization in Developing the Emerging Scholars and Practitioners on Migration Issues (ESPMI) Network

*Brittany Lauren Wheeler and Petra Molnar*

## Introduction: How Did We Get Here, and Where Is Here?

Toronto, Canada. Kampala, Uganda. Kolkata, India. Bogotá, Colombia. Poznan, Poland. These are the cities in which the International Association of the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM) and the Refugee Research Network (RRN) met over the past decade. For what would become the ESPMI Network, they were especially crucial, collaborative spaces. These nexus points, complemented by hosts of emails and Skype conversations, gave rise to an international project that now connects hundreds of people across the world who are keen to contribute to the critical study of forced migration, and wish to engage in a realistic discussion about practice. The Emerging Scholars and Practitioners on Migration Issues (ESPMI) Network<sup>1</sup> also connects policymakers, journalists, artists, and others involved

with and affected by forced migration. Through identifying project-based work, establishing a network of professional connections, and developing the opportunity to publish and access research and initiatives, ESPMI has charted a largely grassroots course toward creating a space for scholarly and professional support. It has not been easy.

ESPMI emerged from within the international RRN, an initiative born of a SSHRC grant. Primary among the RRN's desired platform of ideas and initiatives were those that encouraged intergenerational, interdisciplinary, and other cross-boundary engagements. ESPMI was a proactive response to these desires, where junior members could develop a meaningful place to contribute to conversations on migration issues. At present, the ESPMI Network is composed of an executive committee in charge of various sub-committees and projects and is generally coordinated by one or two individuals. The coordinator is responsible for communicating and building the vision of the network in collaboration with the executive committee, delegating tasks to specific sub-committees, and liaising with the committee dedicated to the production of the *Refugee Review*, ESPMI's peer reviewed online journal.

This chapter will provide an overview of ESPMI's trajectory as a working group and network. It documents the challenges and successes accompanying the interweaving of in-person and social media-based engagement, in identifying and critiquing the network's mission from within, in weighing the utility of institutional support and traditional funding sources, and in maintaining momentum in endeavours reliant upon the contributions of a network of volunteers. It also acknowledges the ongoing questions that permeated the work of ESPMI, including: what methodologies strike the balance between rigour and inclusive collaboration when creating a peer-reviewed journal? Between the benefits of independent work and the pitfalls of lacking institutional power and attendant funding? Between timely knowledge production and the many practical reformulations required to create a space for that meaningful knowledge?

To answer these questions honestly, the ESPMI team prioritized three working principles: 1) Work tirelessly via personal communication and networking to broaden the network's potential participants and executive leaders, and continuously consider how these participants are represented in/by the network; 2) Embrace the uncertainty inherent in forging ahead while still forming the identity of the group. Ultimately, the ESPMI

team organized around the task of creating a new peer-reviewed journal, honing the network's identity and aspirations in large part through undertaking this; 3) Transparently apply the simple method of try-and-try again, and ask-and-ask-again, whether in adopting project ideas, revamping previous attempts at outreach in hopes of striking upon more fertile ground, or in seeking collaborators and advice among established scholars and practitioners.

## Where We Went, and with Whom

### *Broad Strokes: From Early Days to Changing Ways*

The ESPMI Network, formerly known as the New Scholars Network (NSN), was formed when a small group of graduate students at the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University in Toronto, Canada, created a “new scholars” working group within the RRN in 2010. By 2012, the group had been formalized within the RRN structure and the new executive committee asked what unique role such a network might play when young scholars have other professional associations through their universities. They began to answer this question through actions such as maintaining a listserv for initial members, dedicated to circulating opportunities in the field, and building a basic website and blog to further build capacity and test the boundaries of cost-free options for networking. During 2012, a small volunteer team began the difficult process of drafting an initial call for submissions for the first edition of the journal, *Refugee Review*, settling on the theme of refugees and social movements, and concurrently encouraging the group's contacts to act as peer reviewers (this process is detailed below). As a way to catalyze transnational conversations, in January 2013 the executive committee attended the IASFM Conference in Kolkata, India, and scheduled a small lunch meeting for new scholars to meet. New members were brought on board and the first volume of *Refugee Review* was released in the summer of 2013.<sup>2</sup> Following time spent further building the network, the executive committee attended the IASFM Conference in Bogotá, Colombia in 2014—solidifying their connections, hosting a larger meeting, and later releasing a second volume of the *Refugee Review* in July 2015. In summer 2016, the executive committee travelled to Poznan, Poland for another IASFM conference, and during a



**FIGURE 10.1**

Banner of the ESPMI Network's Website with ESPMI Statement (2016). Source: Accessed June 21, 2017. <https://espmi-network.com>.

meeting with emerging scholars, marked the transition in leadership from a small, long-standing work group to an expanded committee taking the network in expansive directions.

### *A Necessary Name Change*

In 2015 the executive committee decided to formally change the New Scholars Network to the Emerging Scholars and Practitioners on Migration Issues (ESPMI) network. The executive committee felt that in order to be as inclusive as possible both within and beyond traditional academia, and to represent the multiple academic-practitioner alliances many members held, focusing on “scholars” alone was neither representative nor sufficient. The adjective “new” became less relevant as well, as deliverables were completed and partnerships expanded. After providing an update on the network in an executive meeting with the RRN in 2015, professor Susan Kneebone from the University of Melbourne suggested that, as a whole, the group sounded as though it represented those who were *emerging* in the field. Following conversations with senior members of the RRN and

within the executive committee, ESPMI was reborn, represented by a new logo and website that acted as a more integrated and dynamic platform for the network and the *Refugee Review*. These changes were introduced to coincide with the release of the second volume of the journal.

### *Rallying around the Refugee Review: How to Begin a Journal and Make It Sing*

When the network formed and took initial steps to begin operating internationally, one of the objectives listed by the initial leadership was to create and publish a peer-reviewed journal. The legacy of this desire, however, did not provide many tools for achieving such a goal, including neither funding nor personnel. The grassroots nature of ESPMI was perhaps never more evident than in the production of the first volume of the *Refugee Review*, published in 2013.

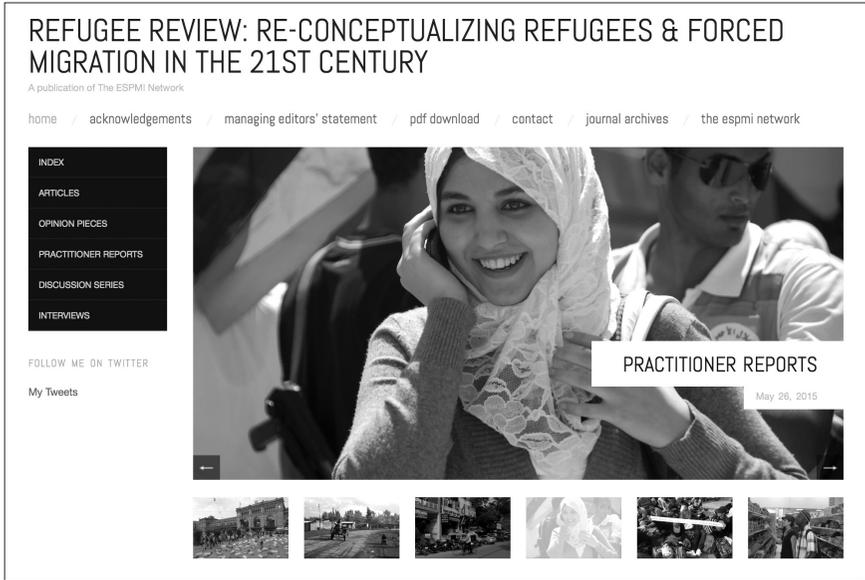
The small executive team found that they had to decide on a theme broad enough—yet specific and rigorous enough—to engage the current leadership, attract attention in response to a new and unknown journal, and confidently carry the weight of its subject. Further, long before the network’s name was to change the team decided that they wanted this publishing platform to be not only a space for quality academic pieces, but also practitioner reports, interviews, a discussion series (on a question related to the journal’s theme), and opinion pieces. With the decision to expand the call to all these types of submission, a high level of clarity regarding the journal’s objectives was imperative within and beyond the call. We also both solicited new work from contacts and received new pieces through our network. This process did not happen on a neat timetable, but concurrently with peer review.

The peer review process also required building. Utilizing the core executive team and individuals from our broader network, we embarked on a process that involved multiple rounds of edits over the course of nearly a year for some submissions. In this, its first iteration, it resembled a peer-reviewed workshopping process, improving preliminarily accepted work of varying levels of readiness with the authors, while concurrently building the structure for publishing the results. This required a delicate balance of communication and transparency about our newness to the process and our commitment to creating something deliverable in a reasonable

amount of time. It also required dedicating an enormous amount of time, with the belief that a slower version of peer review would create the solid foundation and quality of content with which we wanted to greet our readership. Ultimately, we did balance this process, and it resulted in ESPMI's singular vision of peer review. The process has since been streamlined, but retains a generous and personal review process for emerging scholars and practitioners, many of whom have not seen their work brought together in such a publication before.

The resulting first edition of the journal featured the work of twenty-six authors and interviewees, eight editors/peer reviewers, the original photography of the authors. It was largely compiled by three executive members. Several members of the executive built a free WordPress site on which to host the journal. The ESPMI Network decided to pursue an open access platform using the Creative Commons standards of attribution and citation to ensure that the journal was widely accessible internationally. The journal remains online, as a website and a downloadable and printable pdf, and copies were also distributed at meetings in the following year.

The second volume of the journal, published in 2015, marked a quantifiable increase in engagement in terms of submissions, editorial review, and reception. The works of more than forty emerging scholars and practitioners were featured, this time rallying around the theme of reconceptualizing refugees and forced migration in the twenty-first century. Another free WordPress site was created utilizing the benefits of the expansion of professional, free templates, and was accompanied, as with the last journal, by a pdf version. The executive team refined the workshoping format of its peer-to-peer-review process, with each submission anonymized and assessed by two peer reviewers to ascertain whether it could be taken forward. This was followed by review by the managing editors and select peer reviewers who would then workshop the piece with the author as needed. Following this second round of peer review, the co-coordinators of ESPMI created guiding documents to formalize the style and editing guidelines for future issues of the journal. The final product, the second volume of the *Refugee Review*, has drawn more than 10,000 unique visitors and accrued almost 20,000 total views at the time of writing.<sup>3</sup> It is also encouraging to note that online engagement remained at a similar level in both 2015 (the year of publication) and 2016 (the year following), and unique visitors to



**FIGURE 10.2**  
 Screenshot from the online version of *Refugee Review* Volume II, published in 2015, hosted on the current ESPMI website.

the site in 2017 still register at about half of the viewership level of the year of the journal’s release.<sup>4</sup>

The *Refugee Review* exemplifies the network’s commitment to the presentation of research that held allegiance less to particular institutions or geographies, and more to the lessons drawn from the collective merit of the many institutions, non-profit organizations, projects, and personal involvements that our authors contributed to in their daily lives. The *Refugee Review*, as it continued into its second and third volumes, increasingly brought emerging scholars and practitioners into conversation with early and mid-career faculty, lawyers, and post-doctoral researchers also published within the journal. We believe that the working, and now more established, methodology of our journal complements the multidisciplinary, multi-locative nature of forced migration, and underlines the need for a diverse submission invitation, a rigorous but collaborative peer-review process, and a platform of open presentation. The *Refugee Review* has

begun to act as a platform for bringing multiple disciplines and perspectives into closer proximity for those that seek to know more about forced migration. It is too often that we are stymied by disciplinary boundaries, lack of funding, and lack of knowledge about how to come together, and thus it is practical, ethical, and imperative to engage with one another in critical discussion in order to consider not only the reconceptualization of forced migration, but a new paradigm for action. The *Refugee Review* is an ongoing form of such action.

## Making a Home on the World Wide Web: Simple Tools, Large(r) Impact

### *The ESPMI Website*

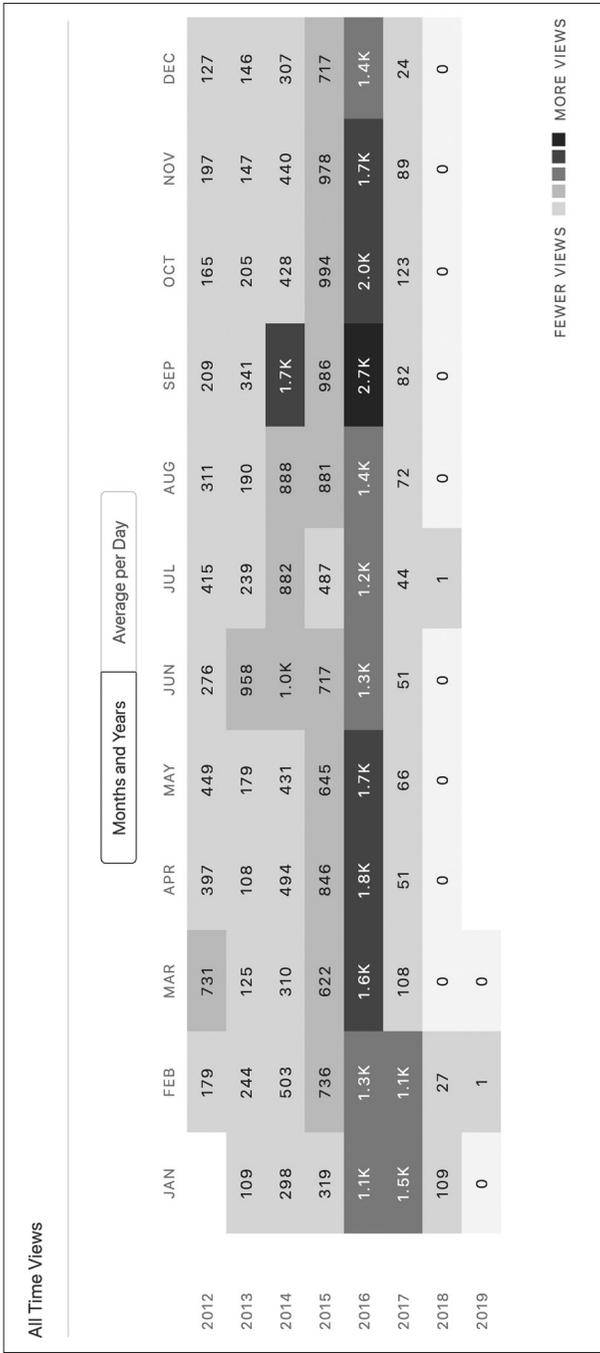
The ESPMI Network managed a WordPress website in a blog format, which linked to a Twitter account, a Facebook page, and two separate websites for each edition of the *Refugee Review*. The network's website became the primary way for people to access the content that the network shares on a daily basis, both original and re-blogged posts from other sources. The following chart depicts increased usage of the ESPMI website from its inception in 2012. The network received its highest visit rate to date with over 2.7K visitors in September 2016.<sup>5</sup>

The website was also recently redesigned by the new executive committee. Since the new design went live in March 2017, site activity has continued to increase.

The automatic recording of demographics and visitors has proven to be one of the most rewarding experiences of running the ESPMI website, tracking the expansion of ESPMI's reach in real time. The website and both journal sub-pages have had visitors from all over the world, including Vatican City, Vanuatu, and Central African Republic. However, although the ESPMI website receives a global range of visitors from over 200 countries, the United States, Canada, and the UK currently remain the most represented in site visits.<sup>6</sup>

### *Innovative Social Media Highlight: The Guest Twitter Project*

The use of social media was paramount in the ESPMI Network's success in reaching a wide and diverse audience, though it was not implemented



**FIGURE 10.3** All time views of the ESPMI website, from creation until the website was migrated to its new location. Source: ESPMI Wordpress Insights.



**FIGURE 10.4**  
 Country-based analytics for the peak year of the ESPMI website, prior to migration (2016). Source: ESPMI Wordpress Traffic.



**FIGURE 10.5**  
 Tweets from the *Guest Twitter Project* “Tweeters”  
<https://twitter.com/ESPMINetwork/status/572329263367647233>  
<https://twitter.com/ESPMINetwork/status/574858755185180672>

immediately. As projects such as the website and journal gained momentum, and members were added, additional projects that utilized Twitter, for instance, became more viable. One important vehicle for connecting ESPMI members and Twitter followers via the expertise of those in our network was the *Guest Twitter Project*.

In December 2011, Sweden implemented the project *Curators of Sweden*, where the Twitter handle @sweden allowed a citizen of Sweden to take over the account every week to share insight into their personal lives and the country's wider attributes. (It is interesting to note that though the project used the word "citizen," the project's website clarifies that this means, "someone who is located in Sweden (citizenship irrelevant), or a Swedish citizen abroad.")<sup>7</sup> ESPMI used this model as the inspiration for a similar, friendly takeover. This initiative was meant to take full advantage of a growing network, creating a platform through which to discuss issues that the network's executive group was not familiar with or did not have time to tackle publicly in a meaningful way. The *Guest Twitter Project* proved very successful, with six initial "tweeters" from around the world showcasing their own work and/or expertise for one week each. These varied perspectives also greatly boosted the ESPMI Network's online presence through its @ESPMINetwork handle: tweeting capacity improved by 192 per cent, tweet impressions went up 127 per cent, profile views went up 53 per cent, mentions increased by 42 per cent, and overall followers of ESPMI increased exponentially.<sup>8</sup>

### *Other Projects Utilizing Social Media and Networking*

The ESPMI Network was also involved with other projects connected to the Refugee Research Network, many of which were advertised or otherwise posted on the ESPMI website or distributed to its members. These projects included participation in several aspects of the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees Project (BHER) supporting tertiary education in Kenya's refugee camps (see chapter 4), the coordination of the review committee for the abstracts submitted to the 2014 International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM) conference in Bogotá (see chapter 12), and partnering on a SSHRC Connections Grant for the Global Refugee Policy International Workshop at Carleton University in order to provide rapporteurs.

## The Challenges of Funding a Network

Through the years spent developing and promoting the ESPMI Network, multiple funding challenges emerged as we sought to create a platform for knowledge production, information exchange, and interdisciplinary collaboration. These challenges, however, simultaneously heightened many of the strengths of an independent network not explicitly tied to any institution: flexibility, creativity, and problem-solving.

While the ESPMI Network was generously supported by the Refugee Research Network with travel funding for some members of the executive committee to attend IASFM meetings, as well as for the subscription for a slightly more advanced website platform, the independence of the ESPMI Network allowed for freedom in its research trajectories, timelines for deliverables, attempts at collaboration, and in the written material it posted online and in print. The open-access nature of the *Refugee Review*, for example, came largely out of necessity, as the journal was not administered by a post-secondary institution nor funded in any way. However, this openness also allowed for knowledge exchange and the dissemination of ideas among people who may not otherwise have been able to access or afford traditional journal articles and publishing opportunities.

Leading a grassroots organization with no operational funding created many challenges. In particular, the money made available through the RRN SSHRC grant was only earmarked for students. It is important to note that while the executive committee members were almost all, at one point, graduate students, for the majority of our tenure on RRN we were both practitioners in the field of forced migration, and thus not eligible for this type of funding. As such, the work that was done to complete the first two volumes of the journal was entirely unpaid. This type of funding exclusion makes the collaborative, interdisciplinary, and practitioner-academic linked work that ESPMI identified as its goal more difficult to do and is a worthy discussion point for large funding initiatives going forward. While we understand that the funding source originated in academia, with time the questions asked at the beginning of this paper (such as what unique role the network might play when young scholars have other professional associations through their universities) were answered by taking the best of academia and linking it to other critical discussions.

That being said, academic-based funding and the RRN in particular can—and in this case did—provide an enormous amount of moral support and legitimacy to the ESPMI Network. Their advocacy of our work, especially around the promotion of the *Refugee Review*, was sincere and often emphatic. The ability of ESPMI members to travel to conferences in Kolkata, Bogotá, and Poznan allowed us to add enthusiastic students we met to the executive team on numerous occasions, led to the inspiration for re-naming the organization after a particular RRN leadership meeting, and provided a physical space to share print copies of our journal with research centres from around the world. These kinds of support and travel opportunities have bolstered and nurtured the network in very concrete ways and encouraged many projects we have attempted along the way.

## Exploring New Horizons: The Next Chapter for the ESPMI Network<sup>9</sup>

Prior to and during the IASFM Meeting in Poznan, Poland in summer 2016, the executive committee began to advertise the need for new ESPMI leadership, launching a web-based call for applicants and hosting a well-attended lunchtime session at the conference to discuss current initiatives. For those of us who had worked as part of the executive committee for a number of years, and had attempted ad hoc and formal leadership transitions before, it was rewarding to find a robust response from the international community. This response made it possible to create a larger executive committee than in any previous incarnation of the group, creating roles we had long envisioned,<sup>10</sup> including a general executive, project heads, a head of web, assisting web-based projects posts, and a managing editor, sub-managing editors, and core peer reviewing team for the *Refugee Review*. The new executive committee began their term in the fall of 2016, and we are pleased to highlight some of their key priorities going forward.

### 1. *BROADEN THE GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE OF MEMBERSHIP AND INCREASE MULTI-PERSPECTIVE KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION*<sup>11</sup>

A key priority for the new executive is to broaden ESPMI's geographic scope by further promoting dialogue and collaboration across the global

**FIGURE 10.6**

The New Dissemination Practices & Public Engagement in Forced Migration Research cluster interrogates current methods of dissemination and public engagement utilized by migration researchers and practitioners, and discusses new opportunities for effective knowledge transfer (ESPMI Network website, 2019).



and local divides found so often within research, policy, and practice, which are exacerbated by issues of physical, digital, and other limitations on accessing and sharing information. These efforts will focus on working with a wider range of educational institutions, research centres, and scholarly (and other) networks throughout the global south, and in partnership with scholars and practitioners with lived forced migration experience. The expansion of ESPMI’s digital communications platforms will be imperative in order to better reach and engage with colleagues in various cities, countries, and regions, ensuring that ongoing projects, such as the *Refugee Review* and the *Guest Twitter Project* are diverse, multi-perspective forms of knowledge production and information sharing. New potential initiatives include the development of local ESPMI chapters, one-to-one “borderless” scholar matching, developing a referral system, and local events.

**2. DEVELOP NEW RESEARCH CLUSTERS TO FOSTER CRITICAL REFLECTION AND INNOVATION IN MIGRATION STUDIES**

The ESPMI network will continue to confront and interrogate key issues in migration research, dialogue, practice, and policy with the goal of encouraging more reflexive, informed, critical, and innovative responses to migration issues. A strategic priority here is to develop new lines of support for emerging work in the field. The executive has created four

new research clusters: Methodological Challenges in Forced Migration Research, New Dissemination Practices and Public Engagement, Bridging Research to Policy and Practice, and Emerging Ideas in Migration Research. These clusters, facilitated by working groups led by ESPMI Executive Committee members, aim to bring together emerging scholars and practitioners to engage in dialogue, generate innovative approaches, drive new dissemination methods, and develop new ways to bridge research with programming and policy. The clusters also provide linkages within the broader ESPMI network, with the intention of developing communities of practice for researchers and practitioners to share literature and ideas, learn about migration issues in different contexts, and cultivate collaborative research projects, papers, and conference panels.

### 3. *CULTIVATE AND ARCHIVE PATHWAYS TO MIGRATION STUDIES*

The ESPMI Network continues to be committed to developing pathways to migration-related education. Such pathways keep new generations apprised of the historical and contemporary reasons that people have been/are forced to migrate, ultimately fostering more inclusive and informed local, national, and international responses to migration. The ESPMI Network plans to collaborate and engage in projects that support new migration scholarship in post-secondary education, as well as explore possible projects in elementary and secondary education settings. A key objective here is to develop a directory of migration-related education programs and courses on the ESPMI website. This directory will provide information about a range of courses globally, in person and online, at the college, diploma, undergraduate, Master's, and PhD levels, as well as summer courses. This priority area will also focus on increasing access to a catalogue of scholarships and other funding opportunities.

## Conclusions: A Commitment to Innovative Knowledge Sharing in a Complex World

This chapter has articulated some of the ways that creating, developing, and supporting an interdisciplinary and international network for emerging scholars and practitioners has been hugely rewarding and successful for those involved. It has also touched upon the fact that supporting a

grassroots initiative with few resources other than the time the executive committee are willing to voluntarily commit has clear pitfalls.

The ESPMI Network has shown that there is room for collaborative work beyond only the traditional academic dissemination of knowledge. The work of ESPMI shows the importance of interrogating methodologies of collaboration and rigour in innovative publishing, as well as the difficulties with striking the right balance between the benefits of independence and the pitfalls of no institutional affiliation or substantive funding. Creating timely and meaningful knowledge often comes with practical considerations, particularly for innovative, unbounded, transnational initiatives. However, grounded, ambitious innovation is what is needed to push ideas forward, to create platforms for new and diverse voices, and to showcase real commitment to creating space for grappling with the complexities of human migration.

## Notes

- 1 ESPMI Network, Cluster of the Refugee Research Network, online at: [espmi-network.com](http://espmi-network.com). Accessed 21 June 2017.
- 2 *Refugee Review: Social Movements* 1, no. 1: 2013. ESPMI Network—Refugee Research Network. Petra Molnar Diop, Brittany Wheeler, Oana Petrica, Negin Dahya, editors. [www.refugeereview.wordpress.org](http://www.refugeereview.wordpress.org).
- 3 *Refugee Review: Re-conceptualizing Refugees and Forced Migration in the 21st Century* 2, no. 1: 2015. ESPMI Network—Refugee Research Network. Petra Molnar, Brittany Wheeler, editors. <https://refugeereview2.wordpress.com/>.
- 4 Special thanks to Paul Dudman and Claire Ellis, members of the executive committee, for these ESPMI Network analytics, shared with the authors in July 2017.
- 5 Claire Ellis, Coordinator of ESPMI Network, Internal Report Analytics, provided on 4 May 2017.
- 6 Claire Ellis, Coordinator of ESPMI Network, Internal Report Analytics, provided on 4 May 2017.
- 7 See for example The Curators of Sweden, Swedish Institute and VisitSweden, 2011, online at: <http://curatorsofsweden.com>. See also Sarah Lyall, “Swedes’ Twitter Voice: Anyone, Saying (Blush) Almost Anything.” *New York Times*, 10 June 2012. Online: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/11/world/europe/many-voices-of-sweden-via-twitter.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/11/world/europe/many-voices-of-sweden-via-twitter.html?_r=1).
- 8 Supra note 6. ESPMI Network Analytics, ESPMI Network, collected by Brittany Wheeler and Petra Molnar for the use of a presentation: Petra Molnar and Brittany Wheeler, The networking of emerging scholars and practitioners: Value, lessons, and

looking to the future. “Innovations in Forced Migration: Showcasing research from the Refugee Research Network (RRN) and beyond,” Toronto, Canada. 15–16 June 2015.

- 9 Adapted from the 2017 ESPMI Network Report. The authors thank the current Executive Committee for sharing these directions with us for the purpose of this publication.
- 10 ESPMI Network, “People,” online: <https://espminetwork.com/people/>. Accessed 21 June 2017.
- 11 This section relies on information provided by Claire Ellis, coordinator of ESPMI, 2016–18.

