



Mediation

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Media and mediated environments define the terms, conditions and context in which migration is experienced, lived and contested. The dense entanglements between media cultures and global migration play a pivotal role in scripting the material experiences and politics of mobility. The term 'mediation' opens up an analytic space to understand and track these shifting intersections and assemblages of institutions and actors. The nexus of media and migration has emerged as a distinctive area of research supporting the fact that the two enlarge and complicate one another. Although media and communication practices are undeniably a central part of all social and cultural lived experiences, the intensity and significance of the linkages between media, migrants and the migration experience merit close attention. Deep connections between human mobility, community and connectivity have existed historically and helped shape and chronicle the migration story. Today, the geopolitical volatility that underlies the mobility of populations and

morphing patterns of technological innovation necessitates a revisiting of the particularities of that overlap. A focus on mediation offers directions for such interventions.

The terms 'media' and 'migration' encompass diverse domains, contexts and connotations. Putting these subjects in the same frame enables a critical point of entry to decenter logics and question assumptions predicated on the prior separation and independence of migrant movements, communication technologies and cultural narratives. Media do frame the manner in which experiences of migration are defined, represented and rendered visible, yet through their circular connections, communicative practices and mediated environments have to be factored integrally into any understanding or theorization about migration. Migrant experiences are emplaced within a diverse range of media technologies, which connect transnational communities, establish both local and distant networks, respond to a sense of nostalgia and also track, recognize, classify and monitor

their presence, visibility and movement. From this perspective, the importance of media and technology does not lie merely in their newness or role as conduits, as has often been viewed. While the ubiquity and speed of these devices are a distinguishing characteristic of the history of the present, media and communication technologies are thoroughly enmeshed within and through the migration experience, playing a more constitutive role.

If we begin from the assumptions that 1) migration and the global politics of media are reconfigured by media technologies and 2) questions of media and communication must go beyond the artifactual, then we need to pay close attention to the constitutive connections between media technologies and the cultural dynamics and politics of migration. The overarching rationale for attempting to understand media and migration together is to critically question, trouble and engage with long-established assumptions about identity, community, citizenship and the nation from a transnational perspective. For this intellectual endeavor, the term 'mediation' opens up conceptual terrain and enables productive lines of inquiry.

CONSTITUTIVE TERRAINS

Migration is a subject comprised of multi-layered processes entangled within shifting and transnationally distributed lines of power. For too long this subject has been entrenched within theoretical frameworks that valorized unidirectional and assimilationist models and Eurocentric perspectives in which nations and individuals have been hierarchically ordered. Societies around the world have resisted the presence of outsiders and thought of them as posing an economic burden or threat. Old resentments today resurface with new velocities enabled by media technologies and their power of circulation. No simple binaries and essentialized categories can capture or represent the density and scale

at which the migrant saga is being constructed. While immigration is a subject that is scripted on several levels, it is most often represented as a singular issue. Migratory journeys are impacted by a host of factors including geopolitical instabilities, the collisions of global economies, the changing patterns of urban growth and agrarian declines due to climate change and economic policies. In addition, technological innovations, infrastructural developments in transportation and communication and global aspirations have all contributed to the migratory pathways of recent years. Migration today is about the politics and processes of mobility, in conjunction with immobility, and experiences of liminality. The challenge is not to see these economic, political and cultural elements as separate strands but rather to find innovative ways of addressing their entanglements, transnational scale and multi-directionality (Hegde, 2016; Ponzanesi and Leurs, 2014).

The subject of migration defies containment; therefore, we need to aim for theoretical and methodological flexibility in order to capture its breadth, scope and complexity. Arguing that global borders today are not neutral lines, Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) caution against disciplinary practices that present objects of knowledge as already constituted. Fixity of terms would circumscribe the polysemic nature of the border and negate the politics and struggles that go beyond reductive dichotomies and binaries, so prized in the language of the social sciences. A simple definition of what constitutes a border is, by definition, absurd, according to Balibar (2002), since limiting complexity does not help us understand global instabilities. Theoretical terms and frameworks must be responsive to the intersecting lines of global transformations. The challenge, then, for scholars is to find ways of addressing migration in terms of overlapping configurations of multiple forces such as power, ideology and culture. In order to engage critically with the global complexity of migration, it is essential to both broaden our conceptual frameworks

and make the epistemic break from the constraints and biases of Eurocentrism and methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Schiller, 2002). There is also an increasing level of scholarly consensus across disciplines for the need to provide deeper contextualization and theorization of the connection between media forms, practices and the materialities of migration.

Beginning from the standpoint that media are at the very core of migration opens up new lines of inquiry that can bring into focus global processes that are fluid, protean and relational. Whether it is the regulation of the border, the dynamics of diasporic life or the circulation of political ideologies, media play a defining and inextricable role. Recognizing this importance entails moving away from the predominant view of media as artifactual and influential towards media as constitutive and infrastructural. Capturing this turn with eloquence, Peters (2015: 5) writes that media until this point were largely conceived as figure and not as ground. The very idea of a medium playing an intermediary role now seems anachronistic, as its power and potential rest centrally on its mediatory role (Latour, 2005). From this new perspective, the media are not merely instrumental – they wield the power to change the contours of social life. Yet many scholars have pointed out the paradoxical tension that if media are working efficiently in their intermediary role, they become invisible. As Eisenlohr (2009: 9) writes, the media oscillate between a powerful presence and a ghostly withdrawal, where ‘in successful acts of mediation what is being mediated appears to be fully and solely present, while the mediating apparatus with the social relations and institutions it is embedded in withdraws into absence’. This propensity to withdraw cannot be explained as merely technical, hence the processes, often political, by which media become entangled in social and cultural worlds merit attention. By extension, the question of what constitutes a medium is by no means a simple exercise and hence cannot be answered in

a straightforward or objective sense (Meyer, 2011). In the space of migration, the question gains additional creases of complexity, especially when we consider the role of media technologies and their ability to reconfigure the performative possibilities of transnational publics and the political meanings of borders and boundaries. It is here that the term ‘mediation’ can be both suggestive and generative.

While the use of the term ‘mediation’ has a fairly long history within the field of media studies (Williams, 1977), in its present iteration, as Livingstone (2009) writes, the term has been repurposed from referring to conciliation towards a more media-oriented term that captures the linking of disparate elements. Silverstone (2002: 762), in his influential work on media theory, describes mediation as a ‘fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical process in which institutional communication (the press, the broadcast radio and television, and increasingly the world wide web), are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life.’ Building on this notion of mediation, with a view of making it more theoretically supple, Couldry (2008) argues that it might be more productive to think about mediation as capturing a variety of dynamics within media flows and emphasizes that we do not need to assume any stable circuit of causality but rather allow for non-linearity, discontinuity and asymmetry. The migrant experience is precisely about discontinuities and asymmetries of power and access and hence demands a nuanced reconsideration of the connections between media forms and practices, mediated environments and the materialities of migration. To this end, mediation to Mazzarella (2004: 346) refers to volatile processes by which a given social dispensation produces and reproduces itself in and through a particular set of media. Further still, arguing that mediation is the very mode of materialization, Appadurai (2015: 224) succinctly states that ‘mediation as an operation or embodied practice, produces materiality as the effect of its operations’ and that

‘materiality is the site of what mediation – as an embodied practice – reveals’. These last two perspectives direct theoretical attention to how different aspects of social and cultural formations are produced, negotiated and gain public visibility through the potentialities of media forms.

MEDIATION, MIGRATION, MATERIALITIES

Migration has always been a space of deep contestation characterized by tensions between opposing forces such as visibility and invisibility, motion and stasis, legality and illegality and alienation and community. With the recent surge in populist nationalisms around the world, there has been a steady focus directed on racial minorities as undeserving contaminants. The current public discourse against migration, especially in the West, is not a wholly new script. In fact, historically, each immigrant wave or refugee community has been met with a fresh reenactment of old animosities. The production of the Other who does not belong to the national community is a form of governmentality that is central to the reaffirmation of national sovereign power and citizenship. The structures of inclusion and exclusion work in tandem and constitute the basis for the articulation of a national community and ironically also secure the bonds of transnational diasporic networks further strengthened by digital media (Madianou and Miller, 2012). Each aspect of migration opens up a host of varied issues, assemblages of discursive and material entities that come together in fluid and often unpredictable ways.

For the study of migration, the term ‘mediation’ is generative for re-centering the role of media within an assemblage of social and political vectors of meaning. It enables us to follow processes that connect and establish links between and across sites. The analytic move to mediation and sense-making also

broadens conceptions of media and qualifies universalist claims about the power of media, which, in turn, inevitably reproduce the hegemony of the West.

A brief discussion of borders and imaginaries as dense sites of mediation highlights the materialities of global migration as performed and reproduced. Borders are sites of state sovereignty, and their symbolic power and meaning are reproduced through the work of the imagination. Borders have today transformed into highly technologized constructions meant to both make visible and intimidate those bodies considered to be risky. Whether along the United States–Mexico border or along the coasts of Greece or Italy, the strategy of border security operations is to maintain, produce and renew a state of ongoing anxiety and a pervasive culture of fear. The border is not a singular construction but one that can appear unannounced and unexpectedly in a variety of formations. Disciplinary practices at the border play a critical role in reinforcing the national imaginary and normalizing exclusionary forms of citizenship (De Genova, 2013). In turn, mythologies of nationalism are today reproduced through physical constructions, virtual and technological infrastructures, documents and embodied performances.

Historically, there have been mass movements of people in various parts of the world; however, the ones happening today are deeply enmeshed within the speed of communication technologies. In the Fall of 2018, images of more than 7,000 people in Central America walking together for miles fleeing violence and economic hardship made headlines globally. This mass exodus across national borders was met by a show of force and a tightening up of border controls in Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico. Their slow journey to the United States was filled with risk, uncertainty and the very real possibility of all kinds of corporeal danger and violence at the border. The long lines of people walking, moving together towards aspirational geographies rather than destinations,

evoke images of the Syrian refugees in 2015 walking together in lines across Europe. How does a large group of people from different countries gain this momentum and collective energy to forge ahead for miles in search of a better life? Where do we begin to tell this story or the stories that are being layered on and dovetailed into one another? It has been reported that the desire to join the ‘caravan’ was fueled either by a Facebook post, a message on a WhatsApp group, a search on Google or an alert regarding a meeting on Twitter (Sief and Partlow, 2018). It has also been reported that along the way migrants stopped at internet cafés to send messages and to recharge devices. With the walk being live-streamed and documented, a visual archive of the present continues to grow. In these banal actions of texting, calling, posting or charging, a movement is born and gathers speed. Media practices begin to tell a different story, bringing in sets of actors, ideologies and geographies that together create the turbulent grounds of migration. The centrality of media has been true of other recent immigrant movements and the activism of the undocumented in both the United States and various parts of Europe.

CONCLUSIONS

While media connect and unite, they have also played a key role in the growth of anti-immigrant resentment and populist nationalism. In the case of the Central American caravan, social media have spawned conspiracy theories that include migrants bringing in strange diseases or, as floated by President Trump in a tweet, the caravan containing ‘criminals and unknown Middle Easterners’ (Riley, 2018). This soon morphed into claims about ISIS terrorists who were lodged with the migrants moving north. As with all events, the claims began to spread globally and circulated with dizzying speed, effectively reproducing racialized imaginaries of a nation

threatened by the impending entry of unruly crowds containing a global assortment of criminals and terrorists. Digital media become part of the ways in which we sort the social world, recognize and classify difference. As in other moments in history, the hysteric reaction to the migrant walk creates a common-sense equivalence between citizenship, race and morality. Images of migrants standing, waiting at check points or jumping into rivers to avoid border security are reminders about the growing number of the global precariat. Their movements around the world are stories of individual struggles, of bodies that are being positioned as laboring technologies and media of survival. These individual accounts, however, are scripts within larger social formations and meanings which are enabled, activated and constituted within media landscapes. A focus on these varied processes of mediation offers new analytic positions and opens up lines of inquiry by directing attention to material circuits of the politics of citizenship, regimes of border control and the imagined geographies of diaspora.

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