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Editorial: Connecting (Forced) Migration and Media Studies

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(p. 1- 11)



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Editorial

Connecting (Forced) Migration and Media Studies

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This Special Issue on (Forced) Migration and Media is the result of two workshops organised at the University of Leicester: a workshop on (Forced) Migration and Media-research that took place on the 13th of June 2016 and a Community Impact event that was organised on the 18th of July, 2016. These workshops were a response to the topical interest for refugees' access to digital technology and the dehumanizing language used in, especially but not limited to British, media regarding migrants and/or refugees (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, & Moore, 2015). (Forced) was purposefully bracketed as the label 'refugee' has its own difficulties. The differentiation between economic and forced migrants for instance negates that reasons behind migration are often multi-causal and multi-layered. It reinforces thinking in dichotomies that homogenizes and tends to negate in-between complexities, as is often appropriated as a governing tool to victimize, exclude and curtail the rights of human beings (Crawley & Skleparis, 2017; Lindley, 2010; Zetter, 2007). In this editorial, we reflect upon the main outcomes of the workshop we and other PhD-colleagues organised on the 13th of June, 2016, and connect them to the articles within this Special Issue.

In 2015, in what was soon framed in mainstream media as the "European refugee crisis", much focus went out to the realisation that migrants travelling in(to) Europe owned smartphones. At that time, critical research connecting different academic fields – forced migration studies and media and communication studies – was to a large extent lacking. This Special Issue aims to contribute to the increasing body of literature in this area, which Leurs and Smets (2018) defined as 'digital migration studies'. Three of the four contributions in this Special Issue (Assaf, this issue; Parker, Aaheim Naper and Goodman, this issue and Voigts and Watne, this issue) are largely based upon papers discussed during the 13th of June workshop. We consider how these contributions speak to the three main outcomes of the workshop. The first outcome is the necessity of moving beyond techno-orientalism, a conceptual

understanding that enables us to partly explain the shifting media-discourse upon an increased arrival of people seeking refuge on Europe's shores. The second outcome points to the importance of context and history in understanding media-use by forced migrants. The last outcome relates to the importance of migrants' voices and the role that academics play in response to addressing social injustices. Dr. Idil Osman's contribution in this Special Issue speaks to this, as she reflects upon the Community Impact workshop she organised in July 2016.

Moving beyond (techno/cyber) orientalism

A number of contributions during the (Forced) Migration and Media workshop paid closer attention to the shifting media discourses around refugees and/or migrants and gave further insight in how the categories refugees and migrants are made. How the 'crisis' was represented in journalistic media, first as a migration and then as a refugee crisis, deeply relates to local ideological and political developments. It also relates to particular emotive images that can leave behind impressions (Vis and Goriunova, 2015). In our workshop, Anja Aaheim Naper considered how migration control is portrayed in Sweden, Norway and Denmark, whereas Sam Parker compared representations of asylum seekers in the UK and Australian print media. Dr. Simon Goodman focused in particular on (re)categorisations of refugees throughout the Refugee/Migrant crisis in the UK. Their presentations have resulted in a collaboration, published in this Special Issue. The three scholars have compared the shifting discourse in the UK, Australia and Norway before and after the image of a Syrian drowning boy went viral. Their contribution enables us to consider how geographical differences matter.

In their pivotal report, published shortly before our workshop Gillespie et al. (2016) also reflect upon the shifting media discourse around refugees and smartphones, as it moved from a surprised reaction that refugees are not necessarily poor, fear that a smartphone could be used as a 'terrorist essential' (p. 9) and unrealistic hopes for techno-fixes to systemic problems regarding geopolitics and borders. Negating the (prior) access and availability of technologies in the lives of forced migrants – those on their journeys to and in Europe as well as those beyond Europe – results in a thinking in simplified dichotomies between 'us' and 'others' and

the west vs the rest. Building upon a stereotypical portrayal of the poor, the figure of the unconnected refugee is used to mark out people as 'deserving' versus supposedly 'undeserving' migrant.

The surprised reaction of mainstream media on migrants using smartphones for travelling in(to) Europe was a sign of techno-orientalism. It misrecognized that only a few years earlier the so-called social media revolutions were celebrated in the Middle-East, and that many people were now navigating their journeys with the same devices that had used to tweet (Leurs, 2016). In her keynote lecture, Dr. Miriyam Aouragh from the University of Westminster also reflected upon what she in in previous work has she referred to as cyber-orientalism (Aouragh, 2012). The growing interest in digital technologies, journeys and refugees, reminded her of the surge of media interest during the Arab Spring. The Arab uprisings were framed through the lens of the use of technology, giving the impression that media-use would somehow make non-western subjects more worthy. Whereas there is not necessarily anything wrong in reporting and/or conducting research on refugees' media-use, the problem is that its focus – especially on the 'new' – tends to overtake the discourse of politics and justice. Dr. Aouragh therefore argued for a critical analysis about the politics of representations and digital infrastructures.

Dr Aouragh also pointed out in her keynote that "the heterogeneity of forced migration does not allow for terminological reductionism". What labels – forced migrant, asylum seeker, refugee, economic migrant, transit migrants – are used, matters as these labels have material, legal and social implications. "Categories have consequences" (Crawley & Skleparis, 2017, p. 59) as they entitle protection and rights to some, and are used to restrict the rights of other. But Aouragh also warned against discursive policing. Instead, a re-orientation of media analysis to media and communication infrastructures which are deeply embedded in capitalism and imperialism is needed. In the end a large part of humanity are "refugees of capitalism". Too much focus on a differentiation between migrant and refugees also further contributes to a discussion of who has rights, instead of holding state actors – especially those who have ratified the 1951 refugee convention - responsible for recognizing (and violating) these rights (Holmes & Castaneda, 2016).

In her presentation, Dr. Savandie Abeyratna further problematized the differentiation and different valuation of different migrants, as she considered how young Muslim men are posed as bigger threat in European media than other migrants are, again showing the importance of critiquing a stereotypical hierarchisation of rights. Joining us from Greece via Skype, Dr. Giorgos Tyrikos - an activist and researcher from the Greek island Lesbos – also reflected upon changes within the rhetoric in mainstream Greek media. As far as Lesbos was concerned, he disentangled three phases of the crisis. The first six months in 2015 the local teams who were overwhelmed as they tried to respond to the increased number of people arriving in Lesbos. The rhetoric in mainstream media, according to Tyrikos, was overwhelmingly right wing and xenophobic. In the second part of 2015, international NGOs and volunteers surged the island who shared their own stories of what they faced. The involvement and story-telling by volunteers on social and later also on press media, Tyrikos argued, was incredibly important in the shift in the media discourse, as instead the focus went out to connections and solidarity. The third phase started with the signing of the EU-Turkey agreement: boats have stopped arriving, but the refugees in Lesbos are in limbo and insecure of what and where their future will be. The media discourse has shifted back to one of demonization, blaming forced migrants for instance for a decline in tourism without considering how the broader political and economic factors have contributed to their arrival. Tyrikos however remained hopeful as he stressed the importance of volunteers and activists' narratives for pushing against this recurrence of a demonizing discourse, but also warned for a simplified sanctified image of refugees. Instead, he emphasized the importance of solidarity and the necessity for all people having a right to humane conditions.

Situating the forced, yet connected migrants beyond journeys

The earlier mentioned report by Gillespie et al. (2016) was also meaningful as it combined a more top-down discourse analytical approach with bottom-up conducted research. This enabled the researchers, contributing to this project, to distinguish three main possibilities or affordances of mobile and/or smartphones: communicative, locatability and multimediality affordances. The first relates to the ability to communicate with friends and family and to connect with people who have already moved onwards, while the second one is used for wayfaring and to familiarize oneself with new places. The multimediality affordance is the

ability to capture and share images, making smartphones into living, expanding photo albums that can also be used to witness of the violence experienced. These different potentials often overlap: communication over Skype also holds a multi-media component, and communication is often also essential for locatability purposes.

In regard to refugees' journeys technologies tend to have a "paradoxical presence": technologies can be a resource, but can also increase threat (Gillespie et al., 2016, p. 2). This also became evident in several presentations provided during the workshop. Urs Charpa considered what role ICTs play in decision-making processes of refugees planning their journeys, whereas Denise Gomes de Moura paid attention in her presentation to the use of tools for migration management by governments. Technologies are for instance used on a large scale to monitor and control the movement of forced migrants (Jeandesboz, 2016). The proliferation of digital systems to control Europe's geographical borders takes place within and beyond geographical borders (Anderson, 2014). However, digital technologies can help migrants to circumvent the movements of state and non-state actors. Social media can, for instance, provide crucial opportunities and information in regards to how to cross territorial borders safely, enables connections to people who can help to organize migratory routes, to find loopholes through the often opaque procedures and to re-unite with friends and family or to connect to acquaintances who can provide necessary insider knowledge (Dekker & Engbersen, 2012; Witteborn, 2015). Access to an overload of ever-changing information can, however, also be overwhelming, as it is sometimes difficult to distinguish right from false information (Frouws, Phillips, Hassan, & Twigt, 2016; Gillespie et al., 2016).

A few other critical remarks need to be made regarding the attention for mediated journeys. First, research on access and use of technologies during journeys rarely touch upon gendered and generational differences and tends to focus on young travelling men (Gillespie et al., 2016, p. 19). Like physical mobility, digital connectivity is far from evenly distributed and much also depends on technologies available and digital literacy prior to flight. Differences in degree, control and initiation of communication and movements are deeply racialized, gendered and classed (Massey, 1991). This also became evident in the presentation of Matt Voigts of the University of Nottingham. Voigts presented a survey conducted among 169 Migrants and Asylum Seekers in Malta, results of which were published later in 2016

(Gauci, Cassar et al, 2016). For this Special Issue, Voigts has co-written a piece with Audrey Watne, a research scientist at the New York University Center for Global Affairs who reflects upon her work in Iraqi Kurdistan. Voigts and Watne (this issue) consider the power dynamics behind obtaining information for refugees, and how this results in challenges for communication between and obtaining information by refugees, aid workers and researchers.

A focus on refugees' journeys also tends to obscure that for many forced and other migrants, mobility is in fact often characterized by long-standing periods of immobility and waiting. Journeys often take years and are most often far from linear or straightforward (Collyer, 2007; Khosravi, 2007; Schapendonk & Van Moppes, 2007; Schapendonk, 2012). The (im)mobility of many migrants is in fact a stretched-out process, zigzag-shaped and slowed down by often exclusionary, bureaucratic border regimes beyond as well as within western countries (Anderson, 2014; Khosravi, 2007; 2014). Increasingly in the global North many migrants are living for undetermined times in on-going conditions of uncertainty and waiting (Doná, 2015, p. 70). An increased body of literature suggests that digital technologies might, beyond obtaining information for and planning onward journeys, also play important social and subjective functions in the lives of migrants, who are living in prolonged uncertainty and who balance attachments between different places.

In 2006, forced migration scholar Cindy Horst (2006) already argued that electronic technologies will greatly affect the social relations of refugee diasporas. Two central features associated with globalization – human mobility on one hand and the emergence of ICTs on the other – come together into the ideal-type figure of the 'connected migrant' (Diminescu, 2008). Yet until 2015, academic research considering the digital connectivity in the lives of forced migrants was limited. Migration was never a permanent break to one's native environment - as prior to the emergence of Internet migrants found other ways to stay in touch (Madianou & Miller, 2011; Wilding, 2006). However, the presence of technologies – enabling for instance transnational connections, the sharing of information and imaginations of lives elsewhere – can alter how forced and other migrants experience and navigate their often uncertain lives.

Research has, for instance, pointed out that technologies are crucial to mitigate and circumvent localized insecurities around the - often informal - working life of migrants, to cope with loneliness and contribute to a shared experience of suffering (Collyer, 2007; Harney, 2013). The combination of money transfer technologies and communication devices can also make it easier to transfer remittances (Lindley, 2007), whereas the circulation of global advertisements might reinforce particular expectations of kin abroad (Gordano Peile, 2014). The influence of digital technologies on the lives of forced migrants goes far beyond financial or material support. The ability to connect to people, places and times people are physically closed off from, can enable dispersed populations to stay politically engaged, to obtain a sense and stability of self, to maintain and/or even establish a sense of community. The digital co-presence of dispersed loved ones can play an important motivational role in enduring hardships in transit and for staying hopeful towards better futures elsewhere (Leurs, 2014, 2016; Twigt, 2018). Meanwhile virtual practices provide asylum-seekers in Germany crucial ways of presenting themselves as the person they want to be or become, rather than the one that is being restricted by a lack of opportunities: as such it is the process of unbecoming a victimized refugee (Witteborn, 2015).

Giorgos Tyrikos, reflecting upon his experiences in Lesvos, also mentioned that smartphone and iPads are for many journeying migrants he has met the most essential thing in their lives. This does not suggest digitality is “the miraculous transformatory manna from heaven” (Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou, & Tsianos, 2015, p. 3). Technology might create additional spaces for agency and creativity, but these spaces should always be considered in relation to the prolonged legal and social insecurity many forced migrants worldwide navigate their journeys in that might necessitate particular practices over others as becomes evident in the next section. It is important to be cautious of celebratory of mobility and connectivity and to negate the societal and material constraints in which technological possibilities are embedded. This also becomes clear in the work of Assaf (this issue) and Voigts and Watne (this issue).

Migrants' representations and the role(s) Migration and Media scholars play

After his presentation, Giorgos Tyrikos was asked whether the people arriving on Lesbos also making use of their smartphones to report on their own journeys: "What about migrants' own voices?" Tyrikos explained that those migrants arriving on Lesbos need their time and energy to plan and coordinate their onward journeys, but they have told him that one day, when they will stop running, they will build their own monuments and mourn their death. In her contribution to this Special Issue, Maria Assaf reflects upon the difficulties and opportunities Syrian refugee journalists residing in Istanbul, Turkey experience for voicing their experiences. Deeply engaged in reporting on developments within Syria, they feel hindered in their opportunities to voice and discuss matters regarding their stay in Turkey.

Tyrikos emphasized the importance of solidarity: of volunteers and activists sharing migrants' stories. This begs the following question: what role can academics and academic knowledge play in this regard? How can we – as academics – for instance reposition refugees not as objects of study but as agents of change? And how are we, as scholars conducting work on migration, ourselves part of the "migration industry" (Anderson, 2017). Moreover, the limited attention to how historical and recent western involvements have contributed to the migration of people is striking. In her keynote lecture Dr. Idil Osman showed the importance of context, history and connectivity. In response to the (continuation of the) Somalian conflict, which started in 1991, (forced) migrant routes have been established and diasporic communities have reshaped experiences of people living in conflict. But transnational connections have also enabled to engender a dialogical diasporic identity among people who are Somali by origin, to be critically engaged in regard to what happens in Somalia, their western home countries and beyond. In the last and forth contribution of this Special Issue, Osman reflects upon the Community Impact workshop she organised on the 18th of July 2016. This workshop was directly aimed at sharing and connecting to experiences of migrant communities, with the aim of considering how academic knowledge can be useful for speaking back to dehumanizing discourses against Islam and migration and for enabling migrants to voice their own concerns. A similar appeal for knowledge sharing for the benefit of conflict-affected migrants can be found in the contribution by Voigts and Watne (this issue).

We sincerely hope that this Special Issue not only contributes to an advancement of academic knowledge regarding the connection between forced migration and media studies, but that it also proves meaningful for people working with, people who consider themselves as, are descendants of, or are otherwise close to people who have been forced to migrate. We are very happy that this Special Issue has finally taken shape and want to express our gratitude for the work and patience of all the people who have contributed to this Special Issue: Maria Assaf, Audrey Watne, Matthew Voigts, Dr. Simon Goodman, Anja Aaheim Naper and Samuel Parker and Dr. Idil Osman. A special thank you goes out to keynote speaker Dr. Miriyam Aouragh, to Dr. Idil Osman, for her keynote speech and the organisation of the community impact event, to Giorgios Tyrikos for sharing his academic and practical knowledge with us, to everyone else who has contributed and to Zakaria Sajir, Foteini Panagiotopoulou and Nerina Boursinou for helping us organising the workshop (Forced) Migration and Media, to Andreas Anastiasou for his time and dedication and to all our other reviewers. Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to Dr. Maria Rovisco and Dr. Jessica Noske-Turner for sharing their knowledge regarding publishing generously.

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