

# MEDIA FIELDS

J O U R N A L

## Introduction

### Media and Migration

Bianka Ballina and Carlos Jimenez

An August 2015 report on the Syrian refugee crisis published in *The New York Times* ranked smartphones on par with food and shelter as part of the “21<sup>st</sup> Century migrant’s essentials.”<sup>1</sup> As the article explains, mobile devices equipped with maps and GPS enable displaced Syrians to navigate unknown territories. They also allow access to information and support provided by families and migrant networks through messaging apps and social media platforms. The smartphone’s growing accessibility within low-income and non-Western media markets set the stage for its transformation into a global migrant tool. Like the smartphone, various other technological innovations of the past decade have significantly altered the experiences and media practices of migrant groups. These changes, in turn, lend new complexity to the constitution of cultural and geopolitical spaces.

Although fixed telecommunication technologies have long impacted the planning and settling phases of migration, only recently have mobile media come to shape the practices, experiences, and portrayals of migration. In this context, questions relating to connectivity, information, and visibility have gained new valence for migrants. Migration has typically involved significant social disconnections, leading to a strong sense of isolation and loss. In the digital age, however, migrants remain tethered to home by multiplying channels of information and communication technology. Undoubtedly, migrants today must still contend with such material and affective detachments. Nonetheless, emerging media platforms enable new and sustained connectivities to place even as varying geopolitical and socioeconomic tensions render migration unpredictable. Online communications have altered processes of migration at every stage, allowing migrants to maintain existing relationships and establish new ones.<sup>2</sup> As such, these technologies grant access to

networks of support that affect decisions about how to move, where to settle, and expand the purview of migrants.<sup>3</sup> As Dana Diminescu argues, the “connected migrant” of the digital age “relies on alliances outside his own group of belonging without cutting his ties with the social network at home.”<sup>4</sup>

Mobile technologies and new media platforms have also facilitated alternative perspectives on migration. In particular, smartphones and other portable devices allow migrants to document their journeys in a variety of ways, producing vivid images and narratives of migration to be shared, both privately and publicly, on social media and other online spaces. Nevertheless, these same media platforms serve as tools for the dissemination of anti-immigrant discourses that portray migrants as unproductive, villainous, and threatening. Moreover, recent technological developments have played an instrumental role in heightening border enforcement and increasing surveillance over immigrant communities.

The current issue of *Media Fields Journal* explores the multiple processes of mediation involved in the construction of migrant spaces and border zones. Our contributors examine the complex entanglements between media and migration from a variety of perspectives. For some authors, analysis of specific media and artistic representations of migrant experiences provide a window into the potential role of art, media, technology, and popular culture as critical praxis. Other contributors foreground the possibilities afforded by new technologies and social media platforms to alter existing modes of authorship and representation, question dominant media discourses, and alter public perception of migrants. As user-generated content enables the circulation of new voices it also forges new connections between media producers, publics, critics, and migrants, thus reconfiguring the divisions between such groups. Finally, this issue includes a number of key conversations with media producers who both contend with broader questions about the representation of migrant stories and address their own contexts and practices of production.

This issue serves in large part as a response to prevailing media portrayals of the migrant crises that have surfaced in recent years the world over—ranging from the more well-known stories of Syrian and Central American refugees to the less familiar images of Cuban migrant camps in Costa Rica. As readers might anticipate, most articles in this collection deal with one of two major loci of global migration: namely, the current European refugee crisis and clandestine immigration across the US–Mexico borderlands. In both contexts, new tensions have arisen in the past two years as millions of asylum seekers risk their lives hoping to escape their violent local contexts. While Europe contends with the influx of millions of refugees from the Middle East, the outpouring of hundreds of thousands of Central American migrants and asylum seekers since 2014 has generated new tensions

along the US–Mexico border. Juxtaposing these two cases invites us to consider the legal, socioeconomic, and geopolitical phenomena by which such terms as “migrant” and “refugee” gain their meaning. In particular, we might contemplate how the simultaneous rigidity and variability of these terms—denoting distinct legal categories yet used interchangeably within popular media discourses—functions within the classificatory logic of biopolitics. In this context, our contributors consider the affordances of different media forms for representing migrant narratives and experiences. Moreover, they examine the discourses about various migrant groups expressed through multiple media and artistic practices.

The first two articles in this issue deal with cinematic representations of migration, focusing on Middle Eastern migrants in Europe. Ömer Alkin analyzes the Turkish-German film *Vatanyolu* (dir. Rasam Konyar and Enis Günayin, 1989), underscoring its treatment of hybridity and migration as critical elements in the constitution of identity as well as space. According to Alkin, this film demonstrates the creation of a gendered family space that responds to the physical and emotional needs of a migrant Turkish family to build a home—albeit a temporary one—while caught between their community of origin and future destination. Alkin identifies a critical difference between the representation of gendered space in the first and second half of *Vatanyolu*. Initially, character placement and arrangements of narrative space take their cues from patriarchal social and familial structures that relegate women to interior spaces, limiting their mobility and control over public space even as the family moves across geopolitical borders. However, as the family constructs new, temporary homes, filmic space extends beyond traditional gender bounds, and the indeterminacy of migrant spaces shakes up familial and social divisions. The film thus manifests a *third space* that enables negotiations and rearrangements of the family and broader social organization. As Alkin notes, this “space of potentiality” reaches beyond Turkish and German culture, rejecting simplistic models of hybridity.

Our interview with filmmaker Iva Radivojevic brings us to the current European context, specifically to the island of Cyprus as seen through Radivojevic’s 2014 documentary *Evaporating Borders* (US and Cyprus). This film lends an eye to the tensions around and discrimination against the hundreds of Syrian refugees that arrive in Cyprus in hopes of gaining asylum in the European Union. Radivojevic highlights the social and political dimensions of space, focusing on the enclosures that make certain migratory flows acceptable and others undesirable. As she points out, the mistreatment of migrants in Cyprus and elsewhere responds to the rigid spatial and geopolitical divisions upon which our identities rest. Like *Vatanyolu*, *Evaporating Borders* deploys cinematic space to explore and question such seemingly immovable divisions between peoples and places. Both films underscore the interlocking of private and public experiences that manifest in the construction of social and cinematic space.

The contributions by Katarzyna Marciniak, Amy Sara Carroll, Curtis Marez, and Ricardo Dominguez expand upon this examination of cultural production as critical practice. These authors consider the role of art in making manifest the uncertain spaces and precarious experiences of vulnerable immigrant populations. Katarzyna Marciniak explores recent ethical debates generated by the responses to the Syrian refugee crisis produced by artists such as Ai Weiwei, Tom Stoddart, Pussy Riot, and M.I.A. She raises a number of necessary questions about the potential and problematics of artistic representations of refugee communities. Multiple critics have noted “the aestheticization or sublimation of trauma” in these portrayals, as well as their self-interested exploitation of refugee narratives to gain visibility and cultural relevance. Marciniak reminds us that the silencing of refugee and migrant voices takes place not only through their exclusion from cultural production but also through the representation of their experiences in art and media. The very process of accessing refugee stories and images entails the exertion of power over marginalized groups; and this imbalanced relation is compounded by excluding refugees from aesthetic, discursive, and narrative decisions involved in mediating their stories for the public. Nonetheless, Marciniak ultimately insists on the “messy” character of art, out of which arises its potential to create “a certain poetic space” that may change how we think about migration and the forcibly displaced.

Amy Sara Carroll transports us to the US–Mexico border, which also serves as the locus of Marez’s and Dominguez’s discussions. Her analysis centers on a recent body of artwork produced in the US–Mexico borderlands, offering the term “undocumentation” to delineate a creative methodology deployed by border artists that “doubles down on negation” and lays bare the erasures and exclusions effected by “the act of documentation proper.” Undocumentation, according to Carroll, involves neither straightforward rejection nor wholehearted adoption of “the imperial optics of documentary aesthetics.” As artistic method, undocumentation responds to the spectacles inaugurated by processes of borderization, confounding the binary oppositions at the heart of Western imperial hierarchies—self/Other, citizen/migrant, etc. The works examined in this essay involve various disturbances of the spatial order through the performance of exhibition. Here, the rearrangement of physical space calls into question state control and institutional power, making evident what the logic of borderization renders invisible. Carroll pays special attention to exhibitions presented at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) campus. As she points out, this focus on the university as a site of significant struggles over where and how to draw the border has become all the more pressing in the aftermath of the US Presidential Election. Anticipating the policies of the Trump administration, various local governments and institutions have worked to set in place a number of preemptive countermeasures. In this context, efforts to turn university campuses into sanctuaries for

undocumented students placed higher learning institutions at the center of pressing political conflicts that crystalize as/in disputes over space.

Curtis Marez and Ricardo Dominguez foreground complex entanglements between art, activism, and technology, paying special attention to instances in which technology is brought to bear additional pressure on the state's ability to erect and police the border. Both of their articles explore Dominguez's work as a performance artist, focusing on a number of his collaborations with fellow artists, activists, and theorists such as Carroll. According to Marez, this work is informed by a legacy of civil disobedience, and it dramatizes power imbalances and quotidian forms of resistance enabled by digital technologies.

Marez pays special attention to Dominguez's recent work with drones and flight facilitators, including the work of performance art developed in cooperation with Ian Alan Paul and Jane Stevens that involved the simulation of a drone crash and fictitious opening of "The UC Center for Drone Policy and Ethics." Among other things, this project highlighted the ethical conflicts that arise from UCSD's position as a hub for drone engineering research, contributing to the development of surveillance and killer drones, including those that are used to monitor the US-Mexico border. For Marez, Dominguez's work with drones and other flying machines renders "a dialectic between utopia and dystopia," underscoring the violent exercise of state control and capitalist power, yet suggesting alternative arrangements and forms of disobedience afforded by different technologies. Marez connects this kind of technological and critical performance with "a longer history of critical flight simulation" deployed by Chicana organizations.

It seemed fitting to follow Marez's article with a contribution offered by Ricardo Dominguez under the collective name of Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0 (EDT 2.0) and b.a.n.g. lab. Dominguez reviews a series of activist art projects collaboratively developed by EDT 2.0 and b.a.n.g. lab since 2004. He pays special attention to the Transborder Immigrant Tool (TBT), a project initiated in 2007 and involving the distribution of mobile phones across areas of the California desert regularly traversed by undocumented migrants. These devices are equipped with GPS coordinates, poetry, and information about water caches placed by NGOs along common migrant routes. TBT garnered hostile responses from several media commentators as well as copious amounts of hate mail attacking the artists involved in this project. The project became further enmeshed in a controversy during 2010, as members of EDT 2.0 and b.a.n.g. lab were placed under investigation by the FBI, two Republican Congressmen, and UCSD. For Dominguez, these negative responses as evidence of TBT's success in creating a "performative matrix" that confronts multiple media institutions and spectators with both activist art practices and the experiences of undocumented migrants. This interplay between disparate structures of power, collective

anxieties, and modes of resistance conditions TBT's function as a critical artistic response to the growing securitization of US borders and concomitant borderization within national borders in the post-9/11 context.

Marisa Venegas and Anika Gupta each consider the changing role, potential, and practice of journalism in the context of digital and global media from differing positions. Marisa Venegas offers her perspective as an Executive Producer for the Spanish-language US network Telemundo. In our interview, Venegas focuses on her experiences producing an investigative television documentary, *Muriendo por Cruzar* (Dying to Cross, 2014), a bilingual co-production between Telemundo, The Weather Channel, and the Investigative Fund. The documentary centers on the growing risks faced by undocumented migrants attempting to enter the United States due to increased border surveillance over the past two decades. In particular, *Muriendo por Cruzar* examines the deadly effects of an immigration checkpoint operating in Falfurrias, Texas since 1994. The checkpoint has altered the common route taken by migrants, forcing them to travel through the inhospitable Texas desert and producing a substantial spike in migrant mortality. As the documentary indicates, this situation has been aggravated by the out-migration of Central American into the area since the summer of 2014. Every year, hundreds of thousands of displaced people from Central America are apprehended by US Border Patrol and countless others perish during the prolonged trek through the hostile desert environment. Our conversation with Venegas provides an inside look into the concerns and processes involved in the production of bilingual migrant narratives. Part of Venegas's work as Executive Producer was to negotiate a collaborative relationship with English-language partners while constructing a text that appeals to a Spanish-language audience more conversant with the topic of migration. Venegas provides critical insight into a changing media environment for journalists who increasingly find themselves working in a collaborative, multilingual, and transnational context.

For her part, Gupta focuses her discussion around the rise of user-generated content and social media technology within journalistic practice and collaborative storytelling. Specifically, Gupta examines the 19 Million Project, a hackathon hosted in Rome from November 2–13, 2015 to promote new forms of collaborative journalism in connection with coders, designers, humanitarians, and members of the international press. More specifically, the hackathon sought to increase the leverage and resources of its participants to address the European refugee crisis. Drawing on an interview with event organizer, Federico Tarditi, Gupta highlights shifting understandings of journalistic authority engendered by the incorporation of multiple voices and skillsets in the treatment of global phenomena. Like Venegas, Gupta helps foreground innovative, translocal media collaborations that challenge traditional production models.

As this issue draws to a close, we return to the fraught media environment of the European refugee crisis. The contributions by Ioana Literat and Eszter Zimanyi consider emerging genres and opportunities for self-representation that new media platforms make available to the “21<sup>st</sup> Century migrant.” Both authors center their attention on the “refugee selfie” as a critical form of mediation that considerably impacts the experiences and public perception of asylum seekers in Europe. As Literat notes, Western media discourses and public debates about the Syrian refugee crisis continuously emphasize the widespread use of smartphones and other mobile devices by these displaced groups. Nonetheless, such discourses often ignore the smartphone’s role as a survival tool used by refugees to navigate unfamiliar and often hostile environments. Indeed, anti-refugee groups persistently deploy refugees’ extensive access to mobile technologies to miscategorize Syrian asylum seekers as “economic migrants” rather than refugees. This line of argument sees access smartphones as incongruous with the utter destitution that is expected from “real victims of war.”

On a different level, such anti-immigrant sentiments continually find their way into press discourses and social media debates that ridicule and/or vilify Syrian refugees and their use of mobile media technologies. More specifically, Literat calls our attention to the images of refugees that circulate broadly across Western media, generating audience responses that range from mockery to criticism and, more commonly, lead to outrage. Such derision and disapproval respond in large part to the discursive construction of refugees as self-absorbed and privileged individuals. Media portrayals of the refugee selfie habitually turn a blind eye to the its empowering potential as an instrument of self-representation that mediates the realities faced by displaced Syrians. Popular media outlets disseminate photographs of refugees taking selfies—to the exclusion of actual refugee selfies—and foreground the presumed frivolity of these media practices and the technologies they rely upon (smartphones, selfie sticks, Internet connections, etc.). In other words, they continuously recode the refugee selfie by picturing such self-representational gestures from an external, observational position. According to Literat, these images have generated “especially vitriolic” responses which define the selfie and its author-subject as morally and culturally inferior. Mockery of the selfie-taking refugee in Western media articulates a general disdain for the selfie with anti-immigrant sentiments and Eurocentric gender and racial discourses. Literat’s analysis of the refugee selfies and their re-mediations highlights the critical power struggles that ensue as new media technologies allow disempowered groups (refugees, women, people of color, teenage girls, etc.) to assert their representational agency in novel ways.

Zimanyi’s contribution directs our attention to the refugee selfie itself, foregrounding the refugee’s role as author, his use of social media platforms to publicly share these images, and the spatial-visual dynamics afforded by the geotagging features of such platforms. The

refugee selfie, according to Zimanyi, manifests a “*digital transcience*” that bespeaks the multiple forms of displacement experienced by refugees. The social media selfie allows refugees to situate themselves in a new setting as well as record and visualize their movement across multiple locations. In addition, as these images reach beyond their intended audience they confront Western viewers with the uncertain and fraught experiences of asylum seekers “in *any* location.” By producing and sharing these selfies, refugees may reclaim a sense of agency and authorial control over their own migration narratives. As the examples included in the article show, refugee selfies allow their author-subject to affirm their individuality against dominant media discourses that present refugees as part of a faceless crowd. As Zimanyi argues, the refugee selfie constitutes not only a return of “the camera’s gaze” but also an assertion of the refugee’s own humanity and agency against dominant media representations of the migrant as threat and/or victim.

Zimanyi also argues that the selfie’s growing popularity among refugees responds to their “unstable relationship to place,” at both the symbolic and material level. The selfie enables direct and intimate forms of address and that foreground the refugee’s role as both the subject and author of migrant narratives and images. These geotagged refugee selfies may create “a moment of disjuncture,” suddenly exposing heretofore unacknowledged entanglements between migrants and social media users in Europe and the United States. Furthermore, geotagged selfies not only call attention to the location of each image but also function as a record of the refugee’s personal story of migration charted onto his own social media maps. As a result, Zimanyi argues that geotagging refugee selfies serves two seemingly contradictory functions. On one hand, geotags are used to assert a sense of emplacement—of connectedness to place—commonly denied to the refugee. On the other hand, geotagging underscores the refugee’s transcience as well as the provisional nature of these emplacements.

The current sociopolitical climate in the West makes critical explorations of the relationship between media and migration all the more pressing. As various critics have observed, recent victories by the Brexit and Trump campaigns demonstrate the political capital that may be accessed through anti-immigrant rhetoric. At the dawn of a Donald Trump Presidency, evolving media technologies risk becoming part of surveillance and deportation campaigns. Nonetheless, such media technologies may also create key opportunities to counteract discriminatory policies and establish alliances between migrants and other targeted groups (women, people of color, LGBTQ individuals, etc.). The growing number of reported attacks against migrants and people of color following Trump’s victory exacerbated concerns over hostile state discourses and policies that legitimize violence against vulnerable groups. For many immigrant communities—and undocumented Latin American immigrants in particular—such fears compound already



existing tensions resulting from forceful anti-immigrant state laws and federal policies over recent years.

Already under President Barack Obama the Department of Homeland Security piloted a program at the end of 2014 that placed GPS-enabled ankle bracelets on undocumented migrants caught crossing the border.<sup>5</sup> Immigrants were digitally marked and tracked to ensure that they would attend their scheduled court hearings. Indeed, over the past eight years, the Obama administration has aggressively pursued the detention and deportation of undocumented immigrants. The rising number of raids carried out by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) resulted in more deportations between 2009 and 2015 than throughout the entire twentieth century (2.5 million), earning Barack Obama the title of “Deporter in Chief” among immigration activists.<sup>6</sup> We recognize that while media technologies can be an incredible informational and empowering resources for migrants, they can also be a means of social and economic control that place the borderlands on the ankles of unwelcomed migrants.

Taking stock of this ambiguous potential, the current issue of *Media Fields Journal* foregrounds the continuous re-coding of particular technologies and media forms by migrants, media producers, and publics. This collection of articles and interviews examines different narratives of migration and ideas about the migrant, as well as the complex processes by which they take shape. Moreover, these critical provocations underscore the need for further research into the entanglements between migration, borderization, and media technologies. We hope that this issue will spark additional consideration of key factors that influence how migrants relate to specific technologies and media forms, including age, gender and sexuality. By stressing these questions, we echo our contributors’ call for more dialogue, collaboration, and diversity of voices not only across media practices but also within scholarly approaches to the study of media and migration.

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**Carlos Jimenez** received his PhD from the Film and Media Studies Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His dissertation entitled "Media in the Fields: Indigenous Mexicans, Emergent Technology, and Community," examines the role of media (mobile phones, social media, community radio, and automated harvesters) in the everyday lives of immigrant farmworkers in Oxnard, California. Carlos helped build one of the few indigenous-language community radio stations in the United States, Radio Indigena 94.1FM. Currently, he is working to advocate for improved access to health services for the Indigenous Mexican population through media campaigns and community assessment surveys.