

EDITORIAL NOTE: MIGRATIONS AND ICT. SHORT OVERVIEW

DANA DIMINESCU*

ABSTRACT. In this introduction, I have taken note of a whole synergy which become established between migrants, given facts, software, devices, territories, that shows evidence of the emergence of a new type of ecological action, a human and non-human assemblage in the migrants life, that cannot be any more interpreted inside the modern political and ideological forms, nor as the result of a technological determinism.

Keywords: *connected migrant, digital traces, diasporas assemblage, sociology of migration*

With the “refugees’ crisis” in the summer of 2015, the world seems to acknowledge the importance of technologies of information and telecommunication (TIC) in the life of migrants. Images of Syrian refugees charging their smartphones on their journeys through the Balkans or the use of Facebook and Google Maps to guide the crossing of European borders have been present in the mass media. At the same date, the media all over the world was flooding with documentaries about the applications (apps), hackathons and all sort of different initiatives of NGOs, social economy enterprises or big digital technologies players engaged in humanitarian causes.

The terrorist attacks of November 2015 and 2016 in Europe had launched again the debate about the migrants’ use of the Internet, creating confusion. The “technological” euphoria of 2015 summer had been replaced by anxiety-provoking attitudes once the same medias reported about the use of (more or less encrypted) applications by people suspected of taking profit of the flux of refugees to infiltrate themselves in Europe and to perpetrate terrorist assaults. It is certain that the summer of 2015 has been an important moment that settled the figure of connected migrant and his/her digital traceability into the collective memory. Even though - the use of TIC by migrants - it is not that new.

* I3-SES, CNRS, Télécom ParisTech. Email: dana.diminescu@telecom-paristech.fr.

In 1996, the movement of “sans papiers” of Saint Bernard in France had certainly constitute a turning point. For one of the movement’s mobilisation events, the Sud-PTT syndicate brought up its help and accessorised the movement’s leaders with hand phones in order to replace the traditionally walkie-talkies used in the coordination of street manifestations. Besides its logistical role, hand phone device had become the medium through which several negotiations with the public authorities have been made and through which the communication channels with the press and the NGO have been maintained. It is also at that point that was created Pajol (<http://pajol.eu.org>), the first website to write the history of migrations based on a web archive. (www.bok.net/pajol/index2.html).

“For me, wrote Madjiguène Cissé (one of the leaders of the movement) the coming together of animist practices with high tech, via internet, Autotel, cell phone, etc., was a distinctive sign of “sans-papiers”, it was representative for our fight.” If in her testimony, Madjiguène Cissé makes reference to “the chicken and the smartphone” as symbols inscribed on the heraldry of sans-papiers, we should also point to the fact that “the little migrant” can also be the beneficiary of communication technologies innovations and can used them at the same title as the full rights citizen of the developed countries.

Just over ten years ago, in 2003, we founded the “ICT Migrations” project at *Fondation Maison des Sciences de l’Homme*, in Paris, a research programme dedicated to the study of migrants and migrations in relation to the development of information communication technology, or ICT. As a result of our fieldwork surveys, we began by observing that ICT had undeniably provided a very valuable support, in order to satisfy this compulsive desire for proximity, this obsessive need to get closer to the distant which every migrant experiences. We also observed that ICT is a social-technical tool which operates in networks and can be used and /or can intensify a network form of societal operation inherently specific to diasporas and which is manifested on the web in different forms.

This is a question of a complex historical and sociological transformation for these technologies do not only affect communications which replace absence, but also all the aspects of the migrant’s life. Thus the departure project is no longer constructed through the stories of returning migrants but frequently after an intensive search on Google and /or Facebook; on the journey, the majority of migrants will be equipped with at least a mobile phone; at the frontier, they will first have to be, as they say, ‘screened’ by the computer - go through the IT border, well before crossing the geographical frontier.

The detention centres for undocumented persons are not only physical prisons, but also spaces for digital imprisonment: this applies to the Schengen Information System or SIS, or other files for the registration of foreigners. People smugglers are also familiar with this digital environment and suggest ways of getting past 'the screen' and strategies for 'keeping a clean image' on the computer.

On arrival in the country of destination, the mobile phone number, e-mail address, Facebook or LinkedIn account have become imperatives to be integrated, find a job but also to remain in touch with and reassure the family back home. Conversations on Skype and social platforms such as Facebook, RenRen, VKontakte, are part of everyday life for migrants and have transformed long-range relationships; it is no longer a question of a short call now and again, but of a way of living together at a distance. As far as family reunification is concerned, we have witnessed the emergence of dozens of dating sites based on ethnic origin.

In the field of diasporas, we have witnessed an increased in the dispersion of communities in physical space and new forms of grouping, action and occupation of digital territories. We stress that the Web and more recently social media provide an environment that is particularly relevant to diaspors for they are inherently inter-relational, interactive and transnational. As major tools for the circulation of information and freedom of expression, the web and social networks provide scattered communities with a new alternative form of communication, representation and action enabling the development of new means of expression to diasporas and unexpected social movements. As the first studies observe, the migrant researchers and engineers are at the origin of the occupation of the web by groups of diasporas.

These networks of highly qualified people (based outside their countries and invoking a pile of origin and identity) have used their technical and scientific skills along with their global dispersion to establish themselves on the Web. Their networks, now referred to as knowledge diasporas and their genealogical or bibliographical search tools also promote change in development policies, there is an increasing focus on the circulation of knowledge by means of academic matching at the expense of a policy geared to the repatriation of migrants. We also note major changes in the field of remittances where several initiatives aim at the integration of banking and communication CORRIDORS, recognising that while migrants and their families have little banking involvement they do, on the contrary, almost always have a mobile phone.

By promoting the accessibility of distant places and remote forms of action, the ICTs do offer unprecedented opportunities to migrant societies but they also involve new unexpected constraints that lead to controversial situations.

Monitoring and 'remote control' whether it be by the family or operational practices of monitoring by the State or marketing are facilitated and increased by the permanent 'availability' and traceability inherent to ITC. On one hand, we witness overexposure of migrants to duties of solidarity towards distant families; there is also a duty to be present on social networks. On the other hand, we witness an unprecedented level of 'tracking' of the flows (of movement of people, information, goods and activities) set up by various official organizations (in the host country but also in the country of origin) and lastly by brands and various marketing platforms.

We only have to make a brief inventory of our means of access (mobile phone, laptop, bank card, transport pass, biometric passport, etc.) to understand the actual network to which we belong and to understand our daily contribution to the production of a multitude of increasingly complex and infinite digital traces.

Migrants and non-migrants, today we all circulate in a digital environment. As we travel, pay, communicate, surf the web, network on different platforms, our personal digital networks grows bigger and bigger and speaks about us through the traces that our digital practices leave at every instant, at each step we take in the ITC infrastructures. These masses of data generated by digital tools often crop up in research and are an increasing challenge to the traditional 'working' of the humanities and social sciences, in their methods but also in their categories, paradigms and ethical approaches. **How can we make use of this new 'raw material' in our research on migration? What is the best way to organise the articulation of subjects and methodology in this context? How can the new methods imported from the exact sciences (statistical processing, analysis of graphs) be articulated with the qualitative research with which they sometimes conflict? Finally, and more generally speaking, what epistemological concepts can we propose to accompany the development of digitalisation and can we speak of a digital theory of migration?**