

The digital border: Mobility beyond territorial and symbolic divides

Abstract

In this article, we develop a definition of the digital border as an assemblage of mediations that articulates digital and other technologies with symbolic resources to draw boundaries of inside/outside both on the ground (territorial border) and in narrative (symbolic border). We subsequently sketch the contours of this assemblage through an emphasis on its dynamics of mediation, its dialectics of resistance and its trajectories of historicity and argue for the significance of this conceptualisation of the digital border in migration research.

Keywords

Border, migration, digital, mediation, power, resistance, symbolic

Introduction

iBorderCtrl, an Artificial Intelligence-driven project of border security, recently funded by the EU, has been hailed as a ‘unique approach to deception detection’. *iBorderCtrl* integrates existing digital controls, such as biometric passport data, fingerprint identification and face recognition, with automated lie detectors to analyse travellers’ linguistic and facial micro-expressions. This extension of surveillance from surface features of the body – face or fingertips – to emotional performances reflects the wider orientation of migration governance towards a holistic, biopolitical and digitised management of human cross-border mobility. As a step towards an ongoing project of convergence between technology and human mobility, *iBorderCtrl* has been critiqued for constituting what Samuel Singler (2018) calls, ‘border assemblages of surveillance and criminal control’, which ‘profoundly impact how we should understand the politics of migration, security, and crime’.¹

Alongside this digital governance of the territorial border, narratives of migration in digital news platforms have been engaging in a parallel act of bordering that uses language and image to exclude, silence and dehumanise migrants across European public spheres – what we call the symbolic border. Speaking of the news journalism of the 2015 migration ‘crisis’ in Europe, *The Guardian* notes that, while news stories of ‘desperation, suffering and rescue’ had then become part of our daily media diet, such stories failed to provide answers about migrants – who these people are and why they are coming – and so helped nurture misunderstandings or even hostility towards them: ‘the fragmented and contradictory media coverage of the crisis’, *The Guardian* said,

‘left room for questions to go unanswered and myths to circulate’ (Trilling, 2019).²

The constitution and consequences of these two intersecting dimensions of the border – the digital governmentality of the territorial border on the one hand, and the digital narration of migration, on the other hand – drive the argument of this article. Our starting point is the current reconfiguration of the border as an assemblage that situates human mobility within the ‘double articulation’ (Silverstone, 1994) of digital mediation, that is, the digital systems of surveillance that materialise the territorial border and the media narratives that make up the textualities of the symbolic border. Our argument is that, if we want to grasp the complexities of the border under conditions of digitalisation, it is not enough to attend to the automated controls of its geographical crossing points or to focus exclusively on the different forms of storytelling in western mediascapes. We need instead to bring the two together in an integrated conceptual account that acknowledges the centrality of mediation in the contemporary border – what we refer to as *the digital border*. The aim is to explore how, both on location and on screen, the technological and symbolic resources of the border – its double articulation – work through specific systems of classification to routinely reiterate the inside/outside distinction and so protect European citizens while excluding its ‘others’.

We develop this account in two moves. First, we review two relevant bodies of literature arguing that, while they usefully theorise the two dimensions of the border – territorial and symbolic, they ultimately fail to fully capture their interconnections. And second, we proceed to sketch out our conceptualisation of the digital border as a technological/symbolic assemblage with its own dynamics of mediation, dialectics of resistance and trajectories of historicity. Our conclusion summarises our account of the digital border as a malleable matrix of symbolic and material interconnections and highlights its value in nuancing current accounts of its exclusionary – but contested – taxonomies of mobility.

Defining the border: Power, territory and narrative

At the heart of the concept of the digital border lies a theory of power as a techno-symbolic assemblage of mediations that produce and reproduce hierarchical arrangements of inside/outside (Dijstelbloem and Broeders, 2015; van Houtum and Kramsch, 2005). Who is allowed to enter and who remains excluded depends on each assemblage’s systems of classification and norms of valorisation that benefit some but punish others. While such regimes of power are constitutive of the border, nonetheless each regime differs from others depending on the context wherein the border emerges and the techno-symbolic resources of mediation available in it. Each assemblage, consequently, also places the actors of the border in distinct

relations to mediation and so each produces its own historically specific rules of inclusion/exclusion. How and to which extent specific assemblages of mediation – that is the technological infrastructures that articulate symbolic resources across space and time – intersect with and organise these regimes of power, at any point in time, is consequently an empirical question in the study of the digital border. The peak of the 2015 ‘migration crisis’ in Europe, for instance, saw the employment of humanitarian securitisation, a regime of border power that combines national security with care for the vulnerable (Chandler, 2014). At the territorial border, this regime of power worked through integrated systems of biometric assessment and satellite surveillance of the Mediterranean Sea – such as Eurodac and Eurosur – alongside other digital technologies, such as smartphones and social media, constructing territories as both ‘digital passages and borders’ (Latonero and Kift, 2018). Within this regime of border governance, migrants’ data profiles were subjected to a binary system of recognition: as either ‘legitimate’ victims in need of care or as ‘illegitimate’ evil-doers in need of confinement. As migrants themselves depended on digital infrastructures for access to safety, such binary systems expanded and accelerated their surveillance across platforms and networks. The symbolic border of this regime simultaneously performed and legitimised the same binary in its public storytelling of migration, in news and social media websites, where, as Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017) have shown, ‘independently of whether [migrants] are victims or assumed perpetrators, they remain consistently marginalized or almost fully silenced in European news’ (p. 621). Humanitarian securitisation was thus performed, at once, through digital databases and through networked storytelling, bringing the territorial border at the edge of Europe (where migrant bodies were digitally governed) together with the symbolic border at the heart of Europe (where migrants were represented as threats or victims).

Post-‘crisis’, following the settlement of more than a million newcomers inside Europe’s territories (Frontex, 2018), a different regime of power emerged – what we call, entrepreneurial securitisation -- which both reconfigured and further consolidated these two dimensions of the digital border. The main locus of this new regime of power was now the host city and the initial binary of victim/threat became increasingly replaced by the binary of entrepreneur/threat. Characterised by cultural diversity and digital connectivity, host cities may have promised newcomers intergration, employment and citizenship, yet they did so only on the condition that they turned into successful economic actors within Europe’s neoliberal markets. While the figure of the threatening migrant thus continued being reproduced through the digital governance of and narratives on migrant bodies, a new norm of the entrepreneurial migrant has now emerged that ties rights to territory with adherence to utilitarian, profit-oriented practices of citizenship

(Georgiou, 2019). As before, this regime operates as much through institutional technologies of migrant surveillance – for example, through datafied profiles of migrants at health and educational institutions, job centres and airlines (Vukov and Sheller, 2013; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019) – as it does through networked storytelling that validates western norms of migrant identity (Colombo, 2018; Musarò, 2017; Tyyskä et al., 2018).

What these two different assemblages of mediation and their power relations throw into relief are the difficulties inherent in defining where and how the border performs its work of classification and exclusion. Research on borders and bordering across social sciences and the humanities have already challenged dominant conceptions of the border as a fixed point in space and opened up new, processual conceptualisations, defining the border as an act of boundary-drawing, independently of where or when this boundary emerges. However, while we follow such research on its view of the border as process rather than place, we identify two limitations in existing scholarship. First, as we discuss below, this scholarship is divided between the material/discursive constitution of the territorial border as a biopolitical affair of control *at* the border (crossing points), and the linguistic constitution of the symbolic border through mediated narratives of migration *inside* the border (the territory of the nation). Second, and consequently, we argue, this divide fails to fully grasp the border as an assemblage of mediations that draws boundaries of inside/outside, at once, at crossing points and inside the national territory, thereby rendering the border an omnipresent and ever-receding operation of hierarchical classifications and exclusions on the ground and on screen.

Territorial border

The first side of this scholarly divide focuses on the territorial border and its (digital) governmentality. Influenced by International Relations, though not exclusively, this strand emphasises the enduring power of the state to decide who has legitimate access to its sovereign boundaries and who has not: ‘States have always been in the business of territorial exclusion’, as Andreas (2003) put it, ‘but the focus and form of their exclusionary practices have varied over time’ (p. 109). It is, in particular, the change from the 20th century regime of military violence, concerned with deterring entry of organised armies into national territory, to 21st century policing, concerned with controlling flows of multiple and dispersed clandestine actors – including migrants – that has come to ‘liquidify’ contemporary conceptions of the territorial border.

The contemporary focus on policing flows, including digital policing through border externalisation and the use of air and sea surveillance (Andersson, 2019), has, in turn, challenged this early topological imagination and forced a radical rethinking of the border as a fluid process of boundary-drawing. Current theorisations of human mobility have thus moved away from the border as a fixed line in space and instead grasp the border as an iterative practice of power that routinely performs the binary of inside/outside at every place where decisions are made as to who legitimately crosses or not. The border, as Parker and Vaughan-Williams put it, has now become ‘increasingly ephemeral and/or impalpable: electronic, non-visible, and located in zones that defy a straightforwardly territorial logic’ (2009: 583; but see also Balibar, 1998; Dijstelbloem, 2009; Dijstelbloem and Broeders, 2015; Pötzsch, 2015).

This processual epistemology of the border matters, for our purposes, insofar as it also incorporates a new understanding of the changing regimes of power that operate at the border. Topological conceptions, let us recall, imply and enact a geopolitical regime of power, where military security is attached to territorial sovereignty and realised through ‘cross-pressures across a border between adjacent states, both making and maintaining it in place’ (Agnew, 2008: 177). Processual conceptions of the border, in contrast, combine security with biopolitical notions of power, where territory is no longer a stable space to be defended – potentially with violence – but a malleable site of non-violent micro-interventions that regulate flows of people through routine practices of monitoring and caring for their bodies (Mezzadra and Nielson, 2014). Humanitarian camps, for instance, where migrants are stripped of identity and reduced to basic needs of survival (eat and sleep), or the apparatus of iBorderCtrl, where their molecular and affective make-up is scrutinised through automated profiling, sustain biopolitical classifications between undeserving and deserving lives in the name of geopolitical interest – what Mezzadra (2019) calls power upon ‘life itself’.

The role of mediation, as these latter examples suggest, has been increasingly prominent in the reconfiguration of border territorialities, abandoning the idea of a ‘wall’ in favour of, what Latonero and Kift call, a ‘distributed network of myriad checkpoints, technologies, and actors, which can be situated inside or outside a given state territory’ (2018: 5). Despite their increasing attention to the technological infrastructures of mediation, nonetheless, our argument is that critical border studies still largely ignore the symbolic dimension of the digital border and the ways in which the two articulate and complicate each other.

Symbolic border

On the other side of the divide, literature on migration and the media has identified, what we call, the symbolic border both in the networked stories and voices of migration produced and circulated through digital technologies (Georgiou, 2018; Leurs and Smets, 2018) and in the journalistic narratives about migration that continue to shape public conversations about human mobility in Europe (Berry et al., 2015; Musarò, 2018; Tyyskä et al., 2018). Literature on digital technologies, to begin with, focuses on the use of smartphones and social media platforms in ‘crisis’ contexts so as to explore the potential of such personalised technologies to shift the power relations of the border. Indeed, even though, as Madianou et al. (2016) have put it, the global spread of mobile technologies, has been hailed for its ‘capacity to give voice to affected people’ (p. 960), including migrants, the extent to which such voice is heard, by whom and to what effect are matters of contention.

The key problematic here is one of digital harms. Research on smartphones across migrant routes, for instance, on the one hand, highlights the indispensability of phones in helping migrants to communicate with others and navigate their journeys (Van Liempt and Zijlstra, 2017), yet, on the other hand, emphasises their potential to render migrants vulnerable vis-à-vis state surveillance (Pötzsch, 2015). While the source of such technology-related vulnerabilities lies in migrants' digital footprints that are inevitably subjected to the border's powerful regimes of data-tracking, such vulnerabilities also have to do with the types of messages and representations migrants interact with online. As they heavily rely on their phones to navigate risky routes and sea passages, Borkert et al. (2018) claim, migrants are often manipulated by malevolent actors and their networks of disinformation that can put vulnerable lives at risk: ‘the outcomes of receiving poor or false information' the authors say, "can cause bodily harm or death, loss of family, or financial ruin’ (p. 1). Reflecting on the ambivalence of the mobile phone, Gillespie et al. (2016) thus strongly recommend a rethinking of current definitions of migrant security to include not only their privacy set-ups but also their content, "provid[ing] warnings regarding the dangers of financial exploitation by certain groups such as taxi/private drivers and smuggling networks’ (p. 98).

If, in digital technologies and migration studies, the symbolic border manifests itself through networked sources of knowledge that may harm migrants’ lives, the second strand of research on media and migration identifies the symbolic border in practices of storytelling – especially, though not exclusively, the journalistic storytelling of migration, in western mediascapes.

Literature on the ‘migration crisis’, despite its internal diversity, converges on the fact that such storytelling systematically misrepresent migrants as either victims or villains (Crawley et al., 2016;

Berry et al., 2015; Georgiou and Zaborowski, 2016; Musarò, 2017; Zaborowski and Georgiou, 2019). Caught between the positions of helpless sufferer or evil threat, migrants never appear in their own terms and always exist within orientalist narratives that silence and objectify them (Malkki, 1996). The boundary of the digital border is here performed through linguistic strategies that portray migrants either as a statistical percentage, part of a mass of unfortunates with one being indistinguishable from another, or as one-dimensional figures existing outside biographical contexts and geopolitical histories (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski, 2017). In parallel to literature on the 'migration crisis', studies in 'post-crisis' storytelling show how the figure of the migrant-entrepreneur gradually begins to partake a similar binary of recognition that, as already mentioned, validates the migrant as economic actor, while vilifying and excluding those who are unable (or refuse) to engage with the economic rationalities of western capitalism (Georgiou, 2019; Gürsel, 2017).

Even though our conception of the digital border does rely on literature on digital storytelling, particularly its description of representation as instrumental in drawing boundaries of inside/outside, such literature, we argue, tends to over-emphasise the linguistic binaries of victim and threat (increasingly, entrepreneur and threat) and so misses the historical articulation of the symbolic with the social relations of the territorial border. Specifically, it underestimates the ways in which the vocabularies of the migrant are deeply embedded in the shifting regimes of border power on the ground – humanitarian and entrepreneurial securitisation. As such, these vocabularies are never static but co-exist as relatively malleable signifiers that can potentially attach different meaning to migrants, depending on the arrangements of power within which each articulation of meaning occurs. A case in point here is the abrupt shift in the vocabulary of migration from empathetic narratives of the child migrant, following Alan Kurdi's death in September 2015, to denunciatory ones of the migrant as terrorist, after the Paris attacks in November of the same year (Chouliaraki et al., 2017).

In summary, media and migration studies have insightfully illustrated how the symbolic border is reproduced through two separate but interrelated processes: digital disinformation, where unreliable or malevolent online sources of knowledge may perpetuate the precarity of migrants' lives, and linguistic misrepresentation, where the dominant vocabularies of migration 'other' and dehumanise migrants in western mediascapes. Because, however, these studies tend to analyse the border in reductive terms, either as a terrain of policing or as a site of representation, both have overlooked the interpenetration of the territorial and the symbolic in defining the border. Consequently, they have also downplayed the ways in which the border is constituted simultaneously through the geo- and bio-politics of migrant bodies and through textual practices

that re-enact such politics by representing migrants on- and off-screen. This does not necessarily mean that there is a conscious synergy between the two. It means, however, that, as our experience of the border always emerges through assemblages of infrastructural platforms and their meaning-making practices, we can only grasp how the border regulates migrant flows around its binary of inside/outside if we attend to these assemblages and their power dynamics within specific historical contexts. It is to the description of this dynamics that we now turn our attention to.

The digital border: Mediation, agency and change

The digital border, as we have established, can be grasped as a shifting assemblage of technologies and meanings organised around historically-specific power relations that regulate migrant mobility across the binary of inside/outside at the edge and within the boundaries of national sovereignty. While this definition sets the grounds for an integrated account of the relationship between digitalisation, mobility and power, three crucial questions remain to be explored, setting the contours of a broader agenda in the study of the digital border. The first concerns the constitution of the digital border: what are its techno-symbolic assemblages made of and how are they organised? The second refers to the role of migrants in the power relations of the border: are these relations of total domination or does the border provide spaces of subaltern agency? And the third question relates to the historicity of the power regimes of the border: what does the shift from humanitarian to entrepreneurial securitisation entail and what does it mean for migrant lives and rights? By addressing these questions, we aspire to flesh out our account of the digital border in terms of its dynamics of mediation, its dialectics of resistance and its trajectories of historicity.

The dynamics of mediation refers to the ways in which the technological and symbolic resources of the border map onto one another in ways that connect (and disconnect) migrants and citizens and, in so doing, shape and reshape mobility and access to Europe's inside/outside space. While technology has always been embedded in infrastructural architectures, with their own arrangements and hierarchies of power, digitalisation, we argue, has reorganised these architectures in ways that highlight three specific infrastructural networks (Chouliaraki and Georgiou, 2017). The first is the network of remediations, which refers to the role of mass and social media in the public representation of the border; the second is the network of intermediations, where various digital networks, from Eurodac to Instagram, link up migrants with security forces, humanitarian groups, local populations and with one another; and the third is the network of transmediations, where online connections enable offline relationships between

those arriving and those receiving them (NGOs, activists, volunteers) at various border locations.

Rather than belonging exclusively to one dimension of the border, each of these networks cuts across territorial and symbolic borders, thereby constantly blurring the distinction between them. The territorial border, for instance, is remediated in the mass media through narratives of illegal migrants or the human cost of risky sea crossings, thereby intersecting with the symbolic border and its imaginaries of security, humanitarianism and migration. Similarly, the intermediations of the territorial border in the use of face recognition technologies, link migrant data with global security centres in ways that potentially turn the biometric into part of migrants' identity narrative. Across its networks, the digital border integrates digital, pre-digital and embodied technologies that together work to draw lines of inside-outside not only as geographical markers of separation but also as narrative tropes of othering.

Addressing the second question with regard to the potential for resistance, we argue that the digital border is not to be understood as a deterministic space of military or biopolitical subjection but as a contradictory space where surveillance co-exists with acts of resistance and self-expression. It is the nature of the digital border as an assemblage of intersecting mediations, enabling horizontal connectivities and interactivities among relatively powerless border actors that, at least partly, renders the border a site of struggle over alternative forms of inclusion and belonging – for instance, as Trimikliniotis' et al. (2016) research shows, when migrants in host cities and volunteers collaborate in local initiatives of solidarity and community building (see also [Georgiou, 2018](#)). Grounded on migrant experiences of profound precarity, the border's potential for resistance depends here on the tactical mobilisation of intermediation and transmediation processes, which connect border actors across online and offline networks and so potentially turn migrants' claims to rights and voice into a 'new form of commons through mobility' (Trimikliniotis et al., 2016: 1). Such mobilisations open up the possibility for migrants, NGO-activists and volunteers to routinely challenge the criminalisation practices at work both in humanitarian securitisation – fighting, for instance, against laws that turn migrant rescue at sea into punishable deed (Tazzioli and Walters, 2019) – and in entrepreneurial securitisation – with migrants tactically using digital platforms to navigate the city and its opportunities for education, sociality and solidarity against the state's regulative practices and exclusionary norms.

The question of resistance is inherently linked to the final question of the digital border, its trajectories of historicity. This is because resistance does not occur in a vacuum but is always embedded in the border's shifting assemblages of mediation that open up their own possibilities for claiming rights and recognition, at different moments in time. Humanitarian and

entrepreneurial regimes of power entail, as we discussed earlier, their own techno-symbolic resources of surveillance – finger/face recognition technologies, in the former, or online employment registration forms, in the latter – so that, in turn, each regime requires and sanctions its own distinct performances of migrant identity. The ‘crisis’ temporalities of 2015, for instance, demanded the performance of abject victims as the rights-bearing subject of migration in order to grant them entry, with migrants tactically performing the identity of the asylum-seeking refugee in the hope of accessing Europe (Trimikliniotis et al. 2016). As the ‘ordinary’ temporalities of 2019 have shifted towards performances of ‘resilient entrepreneurship’ and their economic subjectivities, so migrants negotiate their identities in ways that help them sustain their legitimate status, independently of whether they actually adhere to such dominant subjectivities (Georgiou, 2019). It is this spatio-temporal dimension of the border’s regimes of power, as they shift and reconfigure their assemblages of mediation across time and space that simultaneously open up opportunities for migrants’ creative self-expression and ‘everyday resistance’ (Hall, 2015).

Conclusion

Our starting point, in this article, has been that digitalisation constitutes the contemporary border as an assemblage of mediations that employ technological and symbolic resources – what Silverstone calls the ‘double articulation’ of mediation – to routinely draw the boundary of inside/outside both at crossing points (the territorial border) and in western mediascapes (the symbolic border). While the territorial border, we argued, highlights the role of technological infrastructures in reconfiguring, asserting and challenging the boundary of inside/outside, the symbolic border highlights the role of representation in performing, legitimising and reformulating this boundary.

In dialogue with processual approaches to the border, we introduce the concept of the digital border in order to capture the power operations of this boundary-drawing assemblage through an emphasis on its dynamics of mediation, its dialectics of resistance and its trajectories of historicity. We have, however, also criticised these approaches for their binary logics, in that they identify the border and its technologies and discourses either at the crossing points or inside the national territory. Against this binary, our conception of the digital border does not merely refer to a place-bound digitised biopolitical system that assorts those who can cross from those who cannot at the crossing points of national/European territories, but as a spatially and temporally expansive system of digitised practices and discourses that continue ‘assorting’ migrants (Bowker and Star, 2000) when they are inside national/European territories. This means that digital

surveillance and migrant representation at the crossing points cannot be detached from networked communication and surveillance within the border, as rules of surveillance and norms of communication tie different places together - for instance, when security forces at the crossing point share data on newcomers with various national government departments; or when those crossing borders share stories on how to safely reach a destination by already settled migrants in cities.

This dynamic conceptualisation of the digital border further problematises the long-standing divide between the territorial border as a security problem managed through technologies of surveillance and the symbolic border as a question of representation legitimised in the continent's mediated public spheres. It thematises instead how their separation may obscure the hidden complicities between the two in producing and legitimising the border as a ubiquitous order of regulation and care, or of regulation and conditional inclusion. Indeed, the power shift from humanitarian to entrepreneurial securitisation reveals the border as an expansive horizon of techno-symbolic boundary-drawing that does not simply encompass the management of migration but also that of citizenship; that is, where access to rights and participation are not granted to legitimate newcomers once and for all but need to be constantly fought for within the European context in line with nationally prescribed conditions for acceptance (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019).

Rather than grasping the border as a monolithic mechanism of datafied or ideological sovereignty, however, our approach acknowledges the dialectics of resistance inherent in its regimes of power. Resistance at the digital border, we argue, takes the form of contingent and contradictory acts of communication and connectivity that emerge in the midst of institutional systems of surveillance and classification, interrupting those systems but never fully challenging their hegemony. Such minor acts cannot formulate a coherent narrative of a just and inclusive global order. Nonetheless, resistance remains an important analytical lens in helping us to better understand the complexities of power at work in the digital border and to strive for inclusive communities of belonging beyond a determining divide of inside/outside.

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Notes

1. <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2018/11/role-technology>
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/aug/01/media-framed-migrant-crisis-disaster-reporting>

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