

# MIGRATION TIMES

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## DIGITALIZATION OF MIGRATION EXPERIENCES

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### DIGITAL MIGRATION: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD OF CONTROL AND SELF- EMPOWERNESS AGENCY

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Migration, a phenomenon as old as human history, involves the movement of individuals or groups from one location to another, either within or across national borders. This process is often driven by fundamental needs for survival, better living conditions, political stability, economic opportunities, or social justice.

In the contemporary digital age, the advent of social media and the rise of other digital tools and technologies has transformed the migration experience, introducing both empowering tools for agency and mechanisms of control. Migrants today rely on smartphones, apps, and social media platforms to navigate their journeys, connect with communities, and share their stories. Yet, as Koen Leurs and Sandra Ponzanesi (2024) argue, this digital reliance also exposes them to increased surveillance and systemic inequalities.



Governments and border agencies are increasingly adopting and integrating advanced technological solutions—biometric systems, algorithmic surveillance, and geolocation data-driven monitoring—to regulate migration flows. These practices raise critical concerns about privacy violations and the potential misuse of personal data. Migrants, often unaware of the risks, may inadvertently expose sensitive information, making them vulnerable to exploitation or criminalization. So, while these tools promise efficiency, they also deepen existing power imbalances. Cultural theorist Paul Gilroy (2024) critiques the optimistic framing of digital technologies as tools of democratization and emancipation. Instead, he warns that such technologies often reinforce oppressive structures, empower extremist movements, and propagate misinformation, amplifying the very forces that contribute to the marginalization of migrants.



At the same time, digital technologies offer migrants unprecedented agency. Smartphones and apps are lifelines, enabling access to crucial resources, maintaining ties with loved ones across borders, and providing platforms for digital storytelling.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram have become critical resources for migrants, providing them with real-time information about migration routes, asylum procedures, and local resources in destination countries. These tools have reduced reliance on intermediaries, such as smugglers, and enhanced safety through GPS-enabled navigation.

Moreover, social media allows migrants to challenge stereotypes and present their narratives to a global audience, it serves as a space for migrants to challenge stereotypes, share personal accounts of displacement and integration, and foster empathy. Scholars like Lillie Chouliaraki and Myria Georgiou (2024) argue that these platforms create opportunities for counter-narratives that resist the demonizing narratives often perpetuated by mainstream media. They become arenas for self-representation and self-inscription, allowing migrants to reclaim their stories.

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Digital migration's dual nature underscores a critical tension: the impact of digital migration depends on how these tools are implemented and utilized. For migrants, they can serve as instruments of autonomy and resistance; for states and institutions, they can become tools of surveillance and restriction. As we delve into the complexity of this multifaceted issue, it is essential to prioritize the voices of migrants themselves. Their lived experiences and narratives provide a vital human lens through which to understand the intricate dynamics and intersections between technology, migration, and power.

# ONLINE VOICES OF EMPOWERMENT

TRAILER: *HARVEST*

Digital platforms empower migrants by equipping them with essential tools for navigating their journeys and adapting to new environments. For example, Leyla, a 17-year-old Somali refugee, transformed her feelings of powerlessness into agency through M-Power, an organization teaching migrants to use film as a medium of self-expression. Leyla's newfound creative skills allowed her to document her experiences, shifting the narrative from one of victimization to empowerment. Similarly, her sister Aida created a short film, *Ernte* (Harvest), exploring Somalia's history of resistance against colonialism. This act of self-representation enabled her to reconnect with her identity and share her story with a broader audience.



*"The journey from Turkey to Germany was extremely difficult. I was so young, but I felt so old. I was without my mum, only with Zara and Mira. I was scared, but I tried not to show it, because Mira is even younger than me. Now that I talk about it, I can't believe it was true. The boat in which we sat leaked ...And then in Germany, everything felt so meaningless and I was still terrified. But with time I told myself that I have to use that chance. After all the difficulties, why should I be afraid any longer? All the bad things that happened also had their positive side, because they strengthened me, I think (...) M-Power gave me something that was more than hope. It retrieved something in me. In earlier days, I went home after school not knowing what to do next. With M-Power I learned about the beautiful things that life has to offer, that there are many steps to go to achieve something."*

In another case, Palestinian refugee Bisan Ouda (@wizard\_bisan1 on Instagram) relied on her Instagram account to show the forced displacement process happening in her homeland. Social media platforms connected her with other refugees, offering real-time updates on refugee camps conditions and humanitarian aid situation. Her efforts underscore the transformative potential of technology in amplifying marginalized voices. This impact was further recognized when she and Al Jazeera's AJ+ received an Emmy Award in the Outstanding Hard News Feature Story category for their documentary *It's Bisan From Gaza – and I'm Still Alive*. The documentary highlights both the immense power of technology in storytelling and its critical role in granting agency and visibility to migrant narratives.

Source: ervete Bobaj and Anh-Susann Pham Thi, "Girls' Self-Empowerment through Narrative in Film," *Migrant Knowledge*, September 23, 2020.

*"This award is a testament to young Palestinian journalists and their professionalism. Bisan's reporting has humanized the Palestinian story after decades of mainstream media's systematic dehumanization of Palestinians. Winning this Emmy is a win for humanity. We feel extremely proud of this bright moment amidst ongoing genocide, and Bisan will continue reporting"*said Dima Khatib, Managing Director of AJ+ Channels, in a statement on Thursday (Al Jazeera, 2024).

Source: Al Jazeera. "Palestinian journalist Bisan Owda and AJ+ win Emmy for Gaza war documentary." September 26, 2024.



DOCUMENTARY: *IT'S BISAN FROM GAZA AND I'M STILL ALIVE*

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These examples highlight the transformative potential of digital tools in enhancing migrant agency, fostering self-representation, and creating pathways for community-building and personal resilience. Yet, the mediation of digital devices in the socio-subjective realm often reduces users' experiences to mere commodities, overshadowing the sensitive and emotional dimensions of their humanity. For Ukrainian refugees and Palestinian detainees, sharing their stories through TikTok blogs can provide a sense of empowerment and visibility. However, this visibility comes at the cost of embedding their narratives into a surveilled digital economy. While these videos may humanize their experiences, they risk being consumed as commodified "content," diluting their political urgency and rarely translating into meaningful structural change or policy action. Drawing on Heidegger's concept of technology as a "framework" (Gestell), it is evident that digital tools are not neutral objects serving the subject but conditions of possibility for subject formation. For refugees, the digital space becomes a site of both empowerment and alienation—a platform to reclaim their narrative and a system that captures and standardizes their lived realities.



Digitalization of migrants through social media also redefines the structure of migrants' networks, providing new ways for migrants to maintain ties with their relatives but also develop new social ties with NGOs, governments or society in its entirety. Social media is firstly a tool for migrants to gain information during their journey. Indeed, it is often through this mean of communication that migrants get in touch with smugglers beforehand. Moreover, more and more migrants use social media as a way to get information about their potential host country (living conditions, legislations, the diasporas), about the migration routes and the journey's risks. All these informations influence their destination choice.

Furthermore, social media is also a way to convey their testimonies about their living conditions during the journey to NGOs and national authorities. However, this digitalization of migration is also a source of many risks because social media is a completely unregulated space. Indeed, misinformation is often shared by smugglers through WhatsApp groups to use migrants as a way to transport drugs or even kidnap them for human trafficking purposes. To face these crucial challenges, influencers and NGOs have also invested in its platforms to counterbalance the massive dissemination of these dangerous misinformations.

For example, The "Number 505" is a WhatsApp service created by 2 French NGOs France Terre d'Asile and Watizat to help migrants in Paris access essential services like food, healthcare, showers, and clothing. By sending emojis corresponding to their needs, users receive guidance to nearby facilities. It overcomes language barriers and ensures accessibility for every migrant. The service is supported by QR codes on flyers and continuously updated information, which prove that innovative digital solutions became humanitarian aid.



*With 505 Migrants, an emoji is all you need to find out about places in Paris providing services for migrants.*

Additionally, the human rights activist and influencer Carlos Eduardo Espina created a TikTok account to give Spanish-speaking immigrants advices related to legislation about migration, particularly to migrate in the US. Carlos's aim is to make accessible trustworthy information for migrants, often unavailable in traditional media channels.



*Human rights TikTok influencer Carlos Eduardo Espina account with 10 million followers*

In February 2024, *The Times* magazine revealed the UK government digital campaign which aimed to dissuade migrants to illegally migrate to the UK. To do so, the British authorities paid influencers from many countries such as Albania, Iraq, Turkey and India to create content about the "hostile environment" awaiting illegal migrants in the UK. These influencers were paid up to £5,000 with British taxpayer's money. This campaign has been criticized for being unethical and manipulative. Indeed, the real problem is the government's failure to provide safe routes. For this reason, the migrants' voices on social media are essential to aware citizens about the situation and to get the attention of governments and NGOs to denounce human rights violations.

# CONTROL AND SURVEILLANCE

Conversely, the very platforms that empower migrants can also function as instruments of control. According to Ricaurte Quijano (2018), digital platforms contribute to a “coloniality of power” (Quijano: 2000;2007) by capturing and standardizing human experiences as data. This process reduces migrants’ subjective agency, transforming their identities into a series of digital traces that can be surveilled, manipulated, or monetized. For instance, the use of GPS and social media by migrants, while empowering, also exposes them to risks of surveillance by states or criminal networks. These platforms can inadvertently serve as tools for tracking, profiling, and controlling migrant movements, reinforcing systems of exclusion.

Furthermore, the commodification of digital interactions within platform economies mirrors what Rozitchner (1972) terms the “fracture of the self,” where human experiences are subsumed into alienated forms of labor and data production. This dynamic reflects the broader critique of platform capitalism, wherein the digitalization of life facilitates not only new forms of agency but also unprecedented mechanisms of domination. The dual role of technology as both enabler and suppressor challenges the simplistic view of digital tools as inherently liberatory.



The platform economy, or cognitive capitalism, is characterized by technological intermediation that permeates not only social connections but also the inner dynamics of subjectivity itself. As Rozitchner highlights in *Materialismo Ensoñado* and *La Cosa y La Cruz*, the digitization of life represents an unprecedented historical strategy of domination, intensifying the ontological fracture between body and spirit. This fracture is embodied in the commodification of human labor and experiences, which become alienated forms of digital capital. Through this lens, the digitalization of life transforms human actions, emotions, and desires into data, captured and standardized by technological systems.



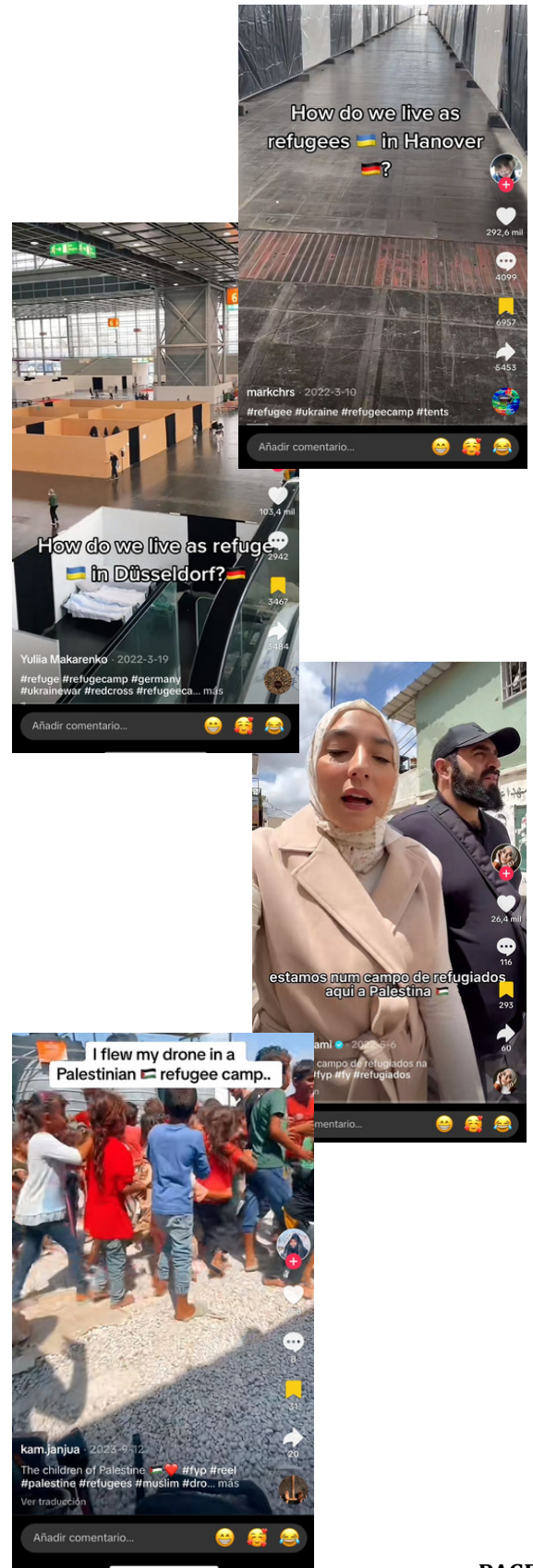
Mejías and Couldry (2019) argue that this datafication produces a new social order based on surveillance, where daily life is reduced to flows of digital data. Migrants unable to produce such data risk exclusion from the social universe, creating new hierarchies of inclusion and marginalization. This systemic transformation of life into data ultimately reflects a dual movement: the empowerment of the individual on one hand, and the profound erosion of subjective autonomy on the other.

# REWRITING THE NARRATIVE

Digital platforms empower migrants by equipping them with essential tools for navigating their journeys and adapting to new environments. For example, TikTok has become a prominent medium for self-expression among refugees. Ukrainian refugees in Europe have used the platform to document their daily lives in refugee centers, sharing experiences of displacement, rebuilding, and resilience. These short-form videos often highlight moments of community-building, cultural exchange, and personal struggles, creating an alternative visual archive of the refugee experience.

*“Speaking to Rest of World, experts pointed to migrant TikTok as a new entry point for young people into the world of irregular migration. The absence of reliable information means that social media has long played a role in helping people share advice, with Facebook groups and other private channels acting as informal hubs for knowledge: how to travel, whom to contact. But with the rise of apps like TikTok where posts are public, compounded by recommender algorithms that repeatedly suggest similar content, virality has given this information greater reach among people who aren’t actively searching for it.” (Inside the Risky World of Mirant Tik Tok, Betsy Joles for Rest of World).*

Similarly, Palestinian detainees in refugee camps use this same platform to shed light on their experiences of forced displacement, offering glimpses of their resilience and hope despite the systematic violence and the consequent human rights vulneration due to genocidal practices perpetrated by the Israeli state. These videos not only humanize their plight but also serve as powerful tools for raising awareness and fostering solidarity with broader audiences.



## **FUTURE CHALLENGE: HOW DO WE HANDLE THIS DIGITALIZATION?**

To address the dual role of social media in migration, it is essential to develop ethical frameworks that prioritize privacy, data security, and transparency. Governments, NGOs, and technology companies must collaborate to create safe and reliable platforms tailored to the unique needs of migrants. Promoting digital literacy is equally crucial to empower migrants to navigate these platforms effectively and safely. Additionally, initiatives that encourage migrants to actively create and share content can amplify their voices and provide accurate, valuable information within their communities.

The role of digital platforms in the migration process is inherently ambivalent. While they empower migrants with tools for navigation, self-expression, and integration, they also impose new forms of control and surveillance. In the era of the platform economy, aspects of human life are mediated through technological devices. These not only disrupt the traditional forms of capital accumulation, but also establish new processes of subjectivation, where human experience, forms of sociability, and the configuration of selfhood are obstructed as digital traces and transformed into data. In this sense, an unprecedented social phenomenon occurs, characterized as the digitization of life. This process no longer generates a state of alienation that detaches the subject from its most intrinsically human quality, which is the capacity to create, its labor force when performing its role as a worker. Rather, it has the capacity to alienate the subject beyond this. Digital platforms, as devices of power, capitalize on the subject's unproductive life, their moments of enjoyment, in pursuit of capital accumulation. In fact, the techno-mediated subject is (produced as a subject) insofar as they are alienated. Through the technical mediation of social bonds, the body acquires the value of a thing and obscures and compromises the sensitive component of subjectivity. In conclusion, technical objects have the capacity to provoke an unprecedented paralysis in the particular production of the self, while simultaneously interfering with the configuration of subjectivity and transforming mediation into the foundation and only possibility of the being's existence. Understanding this duality requires a critical, situated perspective that considers how technology mediates the production of subjectivity within the socio-technical assemblages of contemporary capitalism. To navigate these complexities, it is imperative to amplify migrant voices in digital spaces, fostering practices of self-representation and collective agency. By doing so, digital platforms can evolve from mere instruments of data extraction into tools that genuinely empower marginalized communities in their quest for dignity and autonomy.