

Migrants and New Media: Digital Ethnography, Transnationalism, and Superdiversity

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter brings superdiversity into conversation with digital ethnography and transnationalism. It argues that there is a need to include digitalized lifeworlds and, especially, practices related to new information and communication technologies in ethnographies of superdiversity in order to do justice to the social relations and the complexities involved. First, the chapter provides a broad overview of the historical importance of information and communication technologies for migrants and the study of migrants' lives and of the evolving research field of digital migration studies. It will then bring digital migration studies into conversation with the superdiversity debates, particularly through a (shared) focus on transnationalism. From a methodological perspective, it suggests a digital ethnographic approach for further interweaving these still widely separate research fields. Ultimately, the chapter outlines how a digital ethnography approach can advance conceptual and theory-driven discussions about superdiversity. The chapter ends with an outlook and by raising key questions to be tackled.

Keywords: digital ethnography, new media, information and communication technologies, ICTs, superdiversity, migrant, transnationalism, digital migration studies, ethnography, digitalization

Introduction

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) in relation to (forced) migration have been discussed in academic debates from three main but different angles: first, how migrants as agents make use of ICTs and the role these play in migrants' lives; second, the significance of ICTs in portraying, controlling, and surveilling migrants and how they affect the general perception of migrants and migration movements; and third, the emerging academic debate that deals with "migrants as data," drawing on computational methods to study digital migrant connectivity (Leurs and Prabhakar 2018, 253). While acknowledging that these fields are extensively interconnected and thus cannot be neatly separated, I draw attention mainly to the first: migrants as actors. More precisely, this chapter concerns itself with the particular relationship of migrants to new media and how

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the insights gained from this field of study may open up interesting areas of research for the debates around superdiversity. Of specific interest here is what Vertovec refers to as “new social formations” in connection with the concept of superdiversity, which include such areas of research as discussions on belonging; increasingly diverse daily lifeworlds, space, and contact; and increasing mobility and associated networking practices among and between “migrants” and “non-migrants” (Vertovec 2019, 132). Of particular interest in this regard is the multidimensional perspective on superdiversity Vertovec proposes in his article “Super-Diversity and Its Implications” (2007), where he goes beyond an ethnic-group-specific perspective and recognizes the coalescence of factors that shape people’s lives (Vertovec 2007, 1026).

Although we could speak of the internet in general as an inherently “superdiverse space,” the discussion that follows concerns itself primarily with what has been commonly referred to as Web 2.0, or the participatory and social web. Some scholars have compared the superdiversity of a variety of the social web’s virtual spaces with that observed in urban spaces. As Androutsopoulos and Juffermanns (2014) rightly point out, “The analogy to the urban spaces originally studied by Vertovec is not the internet as a whole, an entity as ‘superdiverse’ as the entire ‘world,’ but specific social spaces discursively constructed by its users” (4). At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the critical voices that have warned that the internet should not be understood as a place of happy and unrestrained diversity. In this respect, Varis and Wang (2011) argue: “Though allowing for the continuous diversification of diversity, the internet is also a space where diversity is controlled, ordered and curtailed” (71). The internet, and the infrastructure behind it, is by no means neutral, and power relations and inequalities are intrinsic to it. This concerns such issues as access and digital literacy but also questions around race and racism, since preexisting racial discrimination is likely to be perpetuated by new technologies (Benjamin 2019).

So far, few scholars have engaged explicitly with the concept of superdiversity in online spaces and at the intersections of online/offline spaces (see Belling and de Bress, 2014). This work evolved particularly in the field of sociolinguistics, where superdiversity has become an essential conceptual tool and has even been employed for a methodological re-assessment of the discipline itself (Vertovec 2019, 129; see also Spotti, this volume). Here, the close interconnectedness between ICTs and superdiversity is widely acknowledged, for example, by Deumert (2014), who writes: “From early on, the idea of superdiversity has been linked, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, to modern communication technologies” (116). In a similar vein, Arnaut (2016) underpins the interrelation of ICTs and superdiversity by arguing that superdiversity can be taken “as a lens for looking at diversity” that is particularly suited to taking into account “the fluidities and complexities of diversity in the age of heightened mobility and digital communication” (49). Androutsopoulos and Staer (2018) identify digital media as a “key element in theorizing superdiversity” (118), whereby digital language practices have been at the core in sociolinguists’ discussion of superdiversity. Moreover, Deumert (2014, 119) argues that superdiversity as a conceptual tool allows sociolinguists to draw attention to the unexpected, and to the agency and creativity of the speaker. Outside sociolinguistics, there has been little

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direct engagement with superdiversity in the contexts of the internet and in connection with ICTs.

This chapter will first provide a broad overview of the historical importance of information and communication technologies for migrants and the study of migrants' lives and of the evolving research field of digital migration studies. It will then bring digital migration studies into conversation with the superdiversity debates, particularly through a (shared) focus on transnationalism. From a methodological perspective, a digital ethnographic approach is suggested for further interweaving these still widely separate research fields. As Wessendorf (this volume) argues, ethnographic methods are particularly suitable for investigating complex social realities because "they are sensitive to individual experiences of difference, complex identifications, and the importance of specific social contexts and situations in how people relate to each other." This also applies to digital ethnography, which further considers how increasing digitalization affects relationships and lifeworlds and looks at both online and offline practices shaped by the digitalization of the everyday (Varis 2020). Digital ethnography thereby combines research on the ground with online research, always situated and contextualized within its wider sociocultural settings (Horst and Miller 2012; Palmberger and Budka 2020; Palmberger 2021).

Subsequently, I suggest that a digital ethnographic approach may bring scholarly debates on transnational migrants' everyday practices with ICTs into productive conversation with debates around superdiversity. As I will argue, it is time to include digitalized lifeworlds, and, especially, practices related to new ICTs, in ethnographies of superdiversity to do justice to the social relations and complexities involved. A first step in this direction is the realization that relationships are built and maintained not only in physical proximity but also through digitally mediated contact. This, in turn, helps us to formulate research questions that take these new realities into account. Ultimately, the chapter will outline how a digital ethnography approach can advance conceptual and theory-driven discussions about superdiversity. It ends by offering an outlook and raising key questions to be tackled.

Digital Ethnography

Digital ethnography has provided many valuable insights about how personal relations are maintained, how communities are built online, and, more recently, how political activism draws on ICTs (Stavinoha 2019). Digital ethnographers mainly follow a non-media-centric approach: instead of focusing on specific media technologies, platforms, and devices, they investigate ICTs and how they are used and embedded in wider sociocultural life contexts (Pink et al. 2016). Hine (2015) argues that digital ethnography needs to remain open and flexible and "demands an adaptive, situated, methodological response" (3). Moreover, developing ethnographic methods that are appropriate for online spaces requires acknowledging that the contemporary internet is "embedded," "embodied," and "everyday." *Embedded* because it has entered all different forms of social life. *Embodied* because we can no longer speak of going online as a single act; rather, it is as a

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continuation of different forms of being in the world. *Everyday* because it has become so mundane that we are no longer aware of its infrastructure and how it might restrict our everyday choices (Hine 2015). Digital ethnography most often relies on a combination of online and offline, and digitally mediated and face-to-face, research. Digital ethnography thus becomes a mobile and multisited ethnography whereby “virtual” and “physical” worlds are not treated as two separate fields (Ahlin and Fangfang 2019; Horst and Miller 2012). Although the ethnographic field as a bounded entity has been questioned in anthropology since the 1980s and there has been a shift from a focus on entities to a focus on relations (see Wessendorf, this volume), research into the increasing digitalization of everyday lifeworlds confronts us once again with the question of how to define the ethnographic field or the “ethnographic place.” Digital ethnographers, such as Pink and colleagues, define ethnographic place, not as a material space or a bounded entity, but rather as a collection of interrelated objects, people, and places (Pink et al. 2016; Pink 2015). At the same time, the concept of fieldwork remains open to adaptation and redefinition.

The question to be explored in the following is how debates from the newly established field of digital migration studies, particularly those based on such a digital ethnographic approach and the intertwined debates on transnationalism, can possibly speak to current debates on superdiversity. Which questions and methodological issues does such a linking bring up?

Migration, ICTs, and the Newly Established Field of Digital Migration Studies

Historically, different forms of media and communication technologies have been vital for migrants. They have enabled migrants to remain in contact with family and friends and to stay informed about ongoing developments in their former places of residence. Before the introduction of digital media and communication technologies, transnational connections were maintained primarily through letters, newspapers, telephone, radio, satellite television, and remittances. Migrants, who have traditionally depended on communication media more than others, have been very resourceful in seeking new ways of communicating over distances. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, when international phone calls were still costly, labor migrants in Europe sent voice recordings on cassettes back and forth to their home countries. These cassettes became a kind of “forerunner” of today’s digital voice messages (Palmer 2022). ICTs allow people to construct shared social fields across geographical distances and to remain in relationships and to create support relations where physical co-presence is not feasible. Digital technology, for example, in communication and transportation, has facilitated mobility in various ways (Urry 2007) and constitutes what Wang et al. (2014) refer to as “infrastructure of globalization.” That said, this does not mean that distance is no longer experienced and that new ICTs, enabling, for example, video calls, texting, and social networking, necessarily and at all times are able to create a sense of co-presence. Furthermore, while new possibilities afforded by

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technological innovations make transnational linkages easier, it is arguable that these possibilities are the sole reason that migrants today maintain transnational connections (Glick Schiller et al. 1995). A certain skepticism toward technological determinism is advisable, especially when taking into consideration the long history of migrants' use of communication media (Dahan and Sheffer 2001).

The wide distribution of mobile media, especially the smartphone, with its numerous applications and easy access to social media platforms, has introduced new ways of staying connected. Migrants were early adopters and became skillful and heavy users of new media (Andersson 2019). The close entanglement of migration and ICTs even became part of a controversial public debate in Europe in 2015 over refugees' possession of smartphones. At one end of the spectrum of debate, the possession of smartphones by refugees was evoked as an argument against their neediness (and ultimately their claim for refugee status); at the other end, refugees' smartphones were seen as essential for their safe passage to Europe and for staying connected with their families (Palmberger 2022). Ultimately, refugees have also been identified as particularly vulnerable to the forms of surveillance and control made possible by new ICTs. This includes different forms of migration management and border control, such as Frontex and EUROSUR (European Border Surveillance System). Moreover, individual biometric data is stored in the EURODAC (European Asylum Dactyloscopy Database), and social media data is used to verify asylum claims and flight routes (Bloch and Donà 2019; Leurs and Ponzanesi 2018).

The increasing role ICTs play in migration processes has resulted in the emerging and growing research field of "digital migration studies." Such studies focus on the "rapid developments in migration that happen in conjunction with the spread of ICTs (information and communication technologies)" (Leurs and Smets 2018, 2). Digital migration scholars engage with bottom-up practices, particularly migrants' everyday use of ICTs, as well as with top-down governmentality and the role digital technologies play therein (Leurs and Ponzanesi 2018). Key questions in digital migration scholarship have been: How do new ICTs enable people to maintain close relations over geographical distances with family and friends? And how do such ICTs change experiences and understandings of sociality and temporality? On a more collective level, ICTs allow "new forms of agency in the building of imagined communities" (Appadurai 2003, 22). Concerning new forms of building imagined communities, the act of reading together (which Benedict Anderson (2006) linked to national newspapers) is "now enriched by the technologies of the web, Facebook, Twitter, and Google, creating a world in which the simultaneity of reading is complemented by the interactivity of messaging, searching, and posting" (Appadurai 2019, 562). Diasporic public spheres, including political participation and civic engagement, as well as collective mobilization, are thus today closely entangled with what is referred to as the "participatory and social web." This also led scholars to introduce the term *digital diaspora*, which describes "a technologically mediated diaspora, a diaspora organized on the internet, an electronic migrant community, and an immigrant group that uses ICT connectivity to participate in virtual networks for a variety of communicational purposes" (Andersson 2019, 145). Digital diasporas are often discussed and linked to their engagement with politics in their home country but also with cross-border political activism

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(Georgiou 2019; Oiarzabal and Reips 2012). Although most studies on migrants and new media focus on the transnational dimension, the question of how new media facilitate migrants' navigation and "appropriation" of their immediate surroundings warrants attention (Leurs and Prabhakar 2018).

In summary, we can state that the rapid digitalization brought by the new millennium has also increased and diversified the means of connectivity and boosted transnational ties. "Enhanced transnationalism is substantially transforming several social, political and economic structures and practices among migrant communities worldwide," argues Vertovec (2007, 1043). Interestingly, at the time the concept of superdiversity was introduced, it was closely associated with transnationalism and new technologies; however, both have seemingly dropped out of much of the subsequent discussion on superdiversity.

Transnationalism beyond Bifocality; or, How to Bring Digital Migration Studies and Superdiversity Debates into Conversation through Digital Ethnography

ICTs, and especially the transnational connections they facilitate, have inspired work on transnationalism and diaspora from the very beginning and have been explored with respect to processes of identification and belonging. With the concept of "technoscape," Appadurai (1996) outlined how new technologies create "diasporic public spheres." More generally, these new technologies have been discussed as key players in globalization processes. In the early 2000s, Vertovec (2004) was already stressing the importance of new technologies for migrants' connectivity across time and space, arguing that "nothing has facilitated global linkage more than the boom in ordinary, cheap international telephone calls [And] it is now common for a single family to be stretched across vast distances and between nation-states, yet still retain its sense of collectivity" (219, 222). Cheap international phone calls, Vertovec claims, have given migrants new ways to stay in touch and to participate in discussions at the (virtual) family "kitchen table." Cheap phone calls boost the dual orientation, or "bifocality," that characterizes the everyday experience of transnational living. Miller and Sinanan made a similar argument ten years later when discussing the emergence of webcams, which offer not only audio communication but also affordable, synchronic visual communication. Webcams are used for not only video calls but also for remote "participation" in personal or religious festivities, long-distance parenting, and mundane activities such as cooking. Participating in the everyday routines of faraway family members creates a particular feeling of intimacy (Madianou and Miller 2012; Miller and Sinanan 2014).

Studies situated in the field of digital ethnography show that ICTs, particularly the smartphone and internet and its related means of communication, have greatly increased the ability of migrants to maintain transnational relations with their families and beyond (see, e.g., Al-Sharmani 2007; Baldassar et al. 2007; Collin 2012; Lee and Francis 2009; Levitt

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2011; Menjívar 1995; Palmberger 2016; Parreñas 2005). The smartphone is often referred to as the most intimate form of everyday digital media (Pink et al. 2016). In the early 2000s, a series of seminal studies on the use of smartphones was published (see, e.g., Fortunati 2001; Ito et al. 2005; Katz and Aakhus 2002; Ling 2004; Thompson 2009). This research based on digital ethnography shows that people stay connected and create intimate spheres of relationships by means of their smartphones. Relationships are maintained and intimacies created through frequent interactions via phone calls, text messaging, Skyping, streaming, or on social media, such as Facebook, Viber, Whatsapp, Twitter, and Instagram (see Licoppe 2004). The diversification of communication technologies has caused a shift from “simple ‘conversational’ methods where communication compensates for absence, to ‘connected’ modes where the services maintain a form of continuous presence in spite of the distance—[and] has produced the most important change in migrants’ lives” (Diminescu 2008, 572).

Scholars in the field of digital ethnography have theorized the connectivity that new digital technologies offer with such concepts as “connected migrants” (Diminescu 2008), “mediatized migrants” (Hepp et al. 2011), “digital diasporas” (Everett 2009), “smart refugees” (Dekker et al. 2018), and “polymedia” (Madianou and Miller 2012). Although the debates around these concepts differ, they all focus on the question of how ICTs allow people to construct shared social fields across geographical distances. Moreover, they show how ICTs allow migrants to remain in relationships and to create support networks where physical co-presence is not feasible. “Whereas previously geographic distance was a significant barrier to taking part in the lives of those who live at a distance, ICTs enable shared social fields to be constructed across vast distances” (Wilding 2006, 138). Thus this research moves away from the concept of “bifocality,” which has concentrated primarily on the communication between the country of origin and the “host” country. Diminescu (2008) describes this new focus as “neither here nor there but here and there at the same time” (578). In response, Rigoni and Saitta (2012) state, “The idea of ‘not here, not there, but here and there at the same time’ can be used to describe those who belong to—or who feel affinity with—several geographical and social spaces rather than being situated ‘in-between’” (6). In my own research with refugees in Vienna, I have observed that co-presence is established across different geographical locations and that multiple co-presences—as well as shifting identities—coexist in varying physical and virtual environments (Palmberger 2022). But, though digitally mediated co-presence occupies an important place in migrants’ social relations, physical in situ relations remain important. These insights are well-established in current debates on transnationalism in digital migration studies, but less so in the current superdiversity debates, which, in the author’s view, do not yet take sufficient account of the increasing role of digitalization and the associated changes it is effecting in transnational ties.

Ultimately, a debate on the issues introduced here, prompted by scholars working in the field of digital ethnography, is timely because advanced digitalization and associated new ICTs are enhancing and reconfiguring transnational connections and complicating the web of relations migrants find themselves in. “Technology has made it increasingly easy to transgress one’s immediate life-world, extend it to and beyond the screen, and engage

in local as well as trans-local activities through previously unavailable means” (Varis and Wang 2011). Moreover, such a debate opens up spaces for interactions and encounters that add a new complexity to the “bifocality” of transnational migrants. Thus, social network sites are more than a means of communication between two localities: they may “create a new form of domesticity” and emerge as “places within which migrants could be said to live rather than being merely technologies of communication” (Miller 2012, 156). Moreover, digitally mediated transnational communication and engagement are not directed to the home country alone but may include individuals and communities in other places and those who do not define themselves in territorial ways. I therefore suggest that in terms of methodology, a digital ethnographic approach may offer possibilities to further interweave digital migration studies and studies of superdiversity, two research fields that have remained widely separated.

Approaching Superdiversity through Digital Ethnography: An Outlook

To summarize: Studies in digital ethnography—which go beyond physical interactions and encounters to include virtual spaces—explore the role new media and communication technology open up. This is not to say that virtual spaces are merely equivalent to or copies of urban spaces. Androutsopoulos and Juffermanns (2014, 4) argue they are not, and that therein lies the relevance of studying virtual spaces of interaction in superdiverse settings. Here, I have gone a step further and argued that in the study of new complexities (see also Negrón, this volume), as is the aim of scholars working around superdiversity, it is precisely the interplay of communication and interaction in virtual and physical spaces that requires our attention and needs to be further explored. Relationships are formed in urban neighborhoods and on the social web alike. I argue that instead of juxtaposing offline and online spaces, we need a methodology that can deal with new realities that emerge at the intersections and in the various entanglements of online and offline spaces (Kaufmann and Palmberger, 2022). This raises the following key questions for the study of superdiversity:

- What does the entanglement of online and offline say about the lived experience of contemporary superdiversity? And how does it extend our understanding of the concept?
- What further methodological adjustments are needed to adapt the concept of superdiversity to the complexity that new media and communication technologies add to changing social realities?

Co-presence across geographical distances is now achieved with the help of digital media and new communication technologies. These experiences affect perceptions of space, distance, and connectivity. “The idea of ‘presence’ has thus become less physical, less ‘topological’ and more active and affective, just as the idea of absence is implicitly altered by these practices of communication and co-presence” (Diminescu 2008, 572). Thus, these

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new kinds of communication and mediation are also likely to generate novel understandings of sociality and the sociocultural practices associated with them. Investigations into the role of ICTs in relation to migration, particularly, in terms of migrants' everyday meaning-making and practices, can, I believe, provide important insights into phenomena related to superdiversity, especially with respect to "new experiences of space and contact" (Vertovec 2007, 1045). Moreover, a focus on ICTs in migratory contexts has the potential to advance a multidimensional perspective on superdiversity that moves beyond an ethnic group perspective and recognizes the coalescence of factors that define people's lives (Vertovec 2007, 1026). In this respect, such a focus may offer, for example, nuanced understandings of diverging patterns of gender and age and shifting generational relations. This is particularly the case in regard to digital literacy and changing care expectations and responsibilities (Wilding and Gifford 2013; Palmberger 2022). In this vein, important work has been accomplished by feminist scholars who have shown the co-constitution of gender and technology whereby technology is understood both as a source and consequence of gender relations (Wajcman 2010). A focus on new media and migration therefore has the potential to contribute to the debates on superdiversity, not least by identifying "new patterns of inequality and prejudices" (Vertovec 2007, 1045).

But there is another aspect to consider—namely, how the internet and new communication media enable novel forms of contact and networking. "With the internet being almost free to access, and with closeness made possible by digital tools (video transmitted over the internet, applications such as Skype, and so on), co-presence becomes easy not only between scattered members of the same family, but also between migrants and non-migrants over one or several geographical areas, and even between non-migrants who are geographically dispersed but physically sedentary" (Rigoni and Saitta 2012, 6). While their physical place of residence (including their legal status) remains important for migrants, new media and media platforms allow for building and forming social relations and negotiating identities beyond territorially defined places. This also affects such categories as ethnicity and race, according to which migrants are often defined. Heyd (2014, 38) argues that "in computer-mediated communication, social categories such as race and ethnicity have to be actively performed and constructed by participants in order to gain visibility." If ethnicity and race in online spaces are only fully realized when actively performed and constructed, it may—at least in some situations—yield new and perhaps even liberating ways to negotiate identities and build relations. However, as stated earlier in relation to technology and racism, overly hasty optimism is certainly not appropriate here. But this is where a superdiversity perspective can be beneficial: it is a perspective dedicated to the interconnectedness of people and their relations that is not bound by migrant and nonmigrant categories. This makes it possible to move beyond a discussion that focuses on how migrants maintain their relationships through new means, and to have one about how online and digital communication entails a different kind of connection and community-building in superdiverse contexts. Such discussions can enrich the current debates on superdiversity and on digital migration studies by thinking through theories of mobility, place, and sociality and critically reworking theories of transnationalism and integration.

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