

NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES AND PEOPLES' MOVEMENT

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The expansion of the internet and the development of technologies that provide accessible, immediate, interactive, and mobile communication across time and space are facilitating the movement of people and giving rise to new forms of cross-border social and political organization. Currently, migrant lives are permeated by technology. Whether they use it for transnational social and political organization, for information sharing, or for navigating their journey, the ongoing expansion of distance-shrinking technologies is changing the migratory experience altogether. According to the 2020 OIM World Migration Report, technological innovation has become an “enabler” and “game-changer” for migration processes (OIM World Migration Report, 2020). Acknowledging this impact, the following essay explores the different ways in which technology is transforming the experiences of human mobility.

This chapter provides an overview of how technological advances in communication affect migration patterns. It looks at the movement of people and how communication technological advances and connectivity shape the experience of the migrants in transit and in destination countries. Specifically, the work draws on the recent experiences of Central American migrants traveling to or residing in the United States. Finally, this chapter is part of a larger ongoing research on the interconnections between communication technologies and human mobility.

The arguments in this essay are based on 15 in-depth interviews conducted by the author with 10 immigrants from Honduras and El Salvador living in the United States and five of their relatives residing in their home countries in Central America. These interviews were conducted in Spanish during a six-month period between January and June 2021.¹ Analyzing these interviews, I expose how communication technology has transformed three fundamental areas of the migration process: (1) the decision and drive to migrate, (2) the journey itself, and (3) life as a diaspora. In addition, I show that scholars should be skeptical of a “celebratory” approach that frames technology as a resource that improves the migration experience. On the contrary, the role of communication technologies in migration processes is marked by difficulties, tensions, and contradictions. I suggest that in studying the interconnections between technology and human mobility, researchers should recognize that while communication technologies afford opportunities for the migrants and their families, they also pose new risks.

The case study of Central American migration to the United States provides an opportunity to examine the interconnections between communication technologies and human mobility. For instance, *las caravanas migrantes*, or so-called migrant caravans, are an important component of the current Central American migratory experience and are crucial for understanding how technology

has become a game-changer and enabler within migratory processes. In addition, the transit experiences and mobility of Central American migrants to the United States reveal the different ways in which communication technologies are shaping the migratory journey. Finally, the lives of the Central American transnational families present a compelling case for seeing how communication technologies can foster cross-border family bonds and intimacies.

The first section of this chapter examines the case of *las caravanas migrantes* as an example of how communication technology has transformed the way migrants organize across national borders and arrange their migratory journey. The next section explores how communication technology is shaping the decision to migrate by looking at how smartphones enable cross-border emotional exchanges and create a sense of “distant proximity” that influences migration decisions. The chapter then analyzes how smartphone use is transforming the migratory journey itself as it allows for instant communication, information sharing, money transactions, and navigation. The next section sheds light on the communication technologies that have become part of the “everyday” lives of immigrants in the United States by observing their practices and rituals of transnational communication connecting them to their countries of origin. Finally, this essay concludes that communication technologies are affecting the entire migratory experience. In this regard, it calls for migration scholars to include technology as a crucial variable that is constantly reshaping human mobility. Moreover, this chapter recognizes that as technology provides benefits and opportunities for the migrants and their loved ones, they also introduce new threats of surveillance and exploitation.

Las Caravanas Migrantes and Communication Technology: Technology as a Game-Changer within the Migration Experience

Widely publicized by international media since 2018, the migrant caravans are groups of thousands of men, women, and children from Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala who travel *en masse* from Central America to the U.S.-Mexican border to seek asylum and a better life. These large groups of people primarily relied on smartphones and applications such as WhatsApp and Facebook to establish communication across national borders, share information, and organize their mobilizations. In an interview with a woman from Honduras who is an active participant in a private digital network on Facebook dedicated to organizing *las caravanas migrantes*, she stated that her group has more than eight thousand members and that technology is imperative for putting on these massive mobilizations:

“Technology has been the major communicative factor for the organization of *las caravanas*. You can see in social media when the date of departure of la caravana is posted. So, when people who are going through difficulties in their lives see in their social media networks that a *caravana* is organizing, they just make the decision to join and leave with *la caravana*. People feel that they are not alone in the process of migration, that they are traveling with thousands more. They see the event in social media, and they find hope, and they just go and do it”

Traveling as a *caravana* allows the migrants to achieve safety in numbers and avoid the predations of criminal gang members and deportations along this dangerous route. Moving as a group also gives rise to a feeling of social cohesion and unity, which motivates people living under harsh conditions to join the caravans and migrate. For organizers, technology is more than a tool for establishing a departure date, agreeing on the route to follow, and planning transit places; it also allows emotional connections to develop within the digital networks of potential migrants, and these connections profoundly affect their decision to join the caravan and leave their countries of origin.

Although the caravans have been grossly misrepresented by media and vilified by politicians such as President Donald Trump, who invoked them as a homeland security threat (Lindt, 2018), they succeeded in increasing global coverage and awareness of the issues around migration in the Americas, more specifically, migration from Central America to the United States. Through communication technologies and social media outlets, the *caravanas* also shed light on the difficulties and complications migrants face along the Central American-U.S. corridor, the largest migratory corridor in the world (Massey et al., 1993; Feldmann et al., 2019). These include the violation of migrants' fundamental human rights by the Mexican and U.S. authorities as well as by organized crime.

Through social media and other outlets, the *caravanas* also became a mediatic event that exposed the fragility of the Central American governments (Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala), which, it was shown, could not guarantee the safety and human rights of their citizens. For instance, these governments were unable to protect their people from the extreme violence perpetrated by criminal gangs. In this regard, the caravans exposed the fact that for the vast majority of Central Americans, migration was a last resort, an attempt to evade human rights violations and other dangers (Sandoval, 2017). A Honduran woman shared that people from her country do not migrate because they want to but rather because they must. In a personal interview, she conveyed that she was forced to leave Honduras with her youngest son because of death threats she received from organized crime groups. She was a community organizer who was trying to make life better for her neighbors in a neighborhood that was controlled by gangs, and she eventually became a target for the criminals. She left her two other daughters in Honduras with her cousin, which she describes as the most difficult decision she has ever made: "It was [a decision] to survive or decide to die." One of her daughters told her before leaving, "I prefer you far away, mom, but alive."

In the case of Central America, migration is the product of a complex interaction of factors including state fragility, which plays an essential role because it leads to insecurity, limited access to public services such as health and education, unemployment, poverty, and the violation of fundamental human rights. In the region, there is a strong correlation between human rights abuses and migratory movements (Patrick, 2011). Within this context, technology plays an essential role as migrant networks plan and organize their movements, share information, and exchange emotional support across borders.

Communication Technologies and the Drive for Migration

Technology allows cross-border communication to take place between migrant families, communities, and networks, and these interactions are shaping how people make the decision to migrate, which is often linked to family and collective negotiations (Boyd, 1989; Tilly, 1990; Castles and Miller, 1993; Portes, 1998). The decision to migrate is rarely purely individual or taken without planning and preparation (Portes, 1998). These family negotiations and planification are increasingly taking place through communication technology platforms.

In the past, people communicated across borders through letters and phone calls in a process that could be expensive, difficult, and slow (Wilding, 2006). Today, transnational networks and families are communicating instantly, often, and affordably through their smartphones (Baldassar et al., 2007). This frequent cross-border digital communication is changing the traditional ways in which migrant networks organize their migratory processes and make decisions. A woman from Honduras described how these new forms of communication influenced her migration decision. After she received a death threat, her immigrant brothers in the United States convinced her to migrate, telling her that they would pay for the cost of her journey from Honduras to Boston. Their exchanges were crucial: "Through WhatsApp chat and calls, one of my brothers told me I had nothing

to worry about, that they would organize my trip, pay for everything, and wait for me. That in the U.S. they had a place for me and a job for me. They really encouraged me to leave Honduras, so I did. These conversations with the phone gave me the confidence to do it.”

As people are communicating within their networks in more efficient and rapid ways, migration decisions are being increasingly influenced by digital interactions. On this subject, Madianou and Miller (2012) claim that “having a relative abroad may not be the only reason to migrate, but it can certainly determine the choice of destination and also provide the catalyst for making the leap” (p. 45), and that media technology can play an essential role in migration decisions (Madianou and Miller, 2012). Through communication devices such as smartphones and tablets; applications and interfaces such as WhatsApp, Messenger, Telegram, and Signal; and social media like Facebook and Instagram, migrant networks are more connected than ever before (Brinkerhoff, 2009). These technologies not only make it easier for migrant networks to share information, plan logistics, organize family finances, and secure work and accommodation in the country of destination, but they also foster cross-border relationships and intimacies.

Apart from their organizational uses, therefore, communication technologies facilitate affective bonds across time and space, bonds which influence the drive to migrate (Madianou and Miller, 2012). In one of my interviews with a Honduran woman residing in Boston, she shared that video calls were her favorite way of remaining in touch with her sisters in Honduras. Although she cannot “touch them or hug them,” she really enjoys looking at their faces and gestures, and this mode of communication makes her feel close to them: “For us, the migrants who can’t go back home, the smartphone and the video chat are all we have. It’s our only option to stay connected to the ones we love back home. It is our only resource.”

Another aspect about communication technologies influencing migration decisions is the aspirational desire for movement. This desire can be amplified through social media interactions. A woman from El Salvador whose sister lives in the United States said that social media can significantly increase the desire to migrate. Social media, she argued, subjects people to a constant blitz of images, videos, and narratives about how migration “can make your life better” but little about the struggles and difficulties of the migratory journey and life as an immigrant in the United States. Instead, they reproduce an imaginary discourse in which migration is framed as an event that instantly makes your life better. She explained the effect of such images: “Social media, where photos and videos are shared daily and constantly, of the life of immigrants in the U.S., in big cities, buying things, making money; this has a great psychological weight in the people in El Salvador who are living in poverty.”

As noted earlier, communication is more than the exchange of messages and information (Carey, 1989). It also involves the exchange of emotions, senses, and feelings as well as social and cultural understandings (Farman, 2011). Today, communication technologies are essential for fostering cross-border emotional exchanges and affective bonds between migrant networks and families. This digital emotional exchange can be best understood through the concept of “connected presence” (Licoppe, 2004), which describes how mediated/digital interactions and new technology (e.g., smartphones) allow people to feel close to each other and be “present” even as they are physically distant. In this regard, communication technologies “provide a continuous pattern of mediated interactions [...] in which the boundaries between the absence and presence eventually get blurred” (Licoppe, 2004, 136). Therefore, the rituals of continuous communication and everyday digital interactions, to a certain extent, are influencing the migration drive.

Digital Connectivity: Changing the Migratory Experience

Another important impact of media technologies on the migration process is how they can shape, in real time, the migratory journey itself. For instance, the smartphone, which is considered part of the

“digital infrastructure of movement” (Gillespie et al., 2018; Latonero and Kift, 2018), is ubiquitous among Central Americans now making migratory journeys. Smartphones are locative and portable media devices. This means that besides enabling connectivity and communication, they also contain information on geographic locations and migrant routes. As a result, they are incredibly useful navigation and information-sharing tools during transit, and as such, they make people feel “safer” during their journey. In fact, migrants now prefer to travel through areas where they can access an internet connection (Latonero and Kift, 2018), opting to follow the new migratory paths of connectivity. This preference has changed established migrant routes, journey planning, and even where and how they spend their money.

Migrants have never had so much information at their fingertips, and yet at the same time, they have never been more surveilled (Hegde, 2016). In this regard, it is important to acknowledge that having access to a mobile phone and connectivity does not necessarily make the migrant journey easier. For instance, migrant smartphone use can make the journey riskier by exposing them to disinformation, misinformation, rumors, and conspiracy theories via social media networks, which can make their journeys even more precarious (Gillespie et al., 2018). Furthermore, migrants have also become heavily dependent on their mobile phones for receiving information and communicating with their families, which makes them increasingly vulnerable during times when they don’t have a connection, run out of credit, or when their phone breaks or is stolen.

As undocumented migrants, Central Americans who travel through Mexico en route to the United States experience extreme dangers: extortion, torture, smuggling, and kidnapping by organized crime outfits or government authorities. When migrants are apprehended, whether by organized crime syndicates or the authorities, their mobile phones are forcibly taken from them and used to demand ransom money from their family members in Central America (Barros, 2017). Apart from its benefits, therefore, the smartphone has also become a coercive tool exploited by organized criminal gangs and corrupt police officials. During an interview, one Honduran immigrant currently residing in Texas told me that his sister, who had been traveling to the United State with her toddler, was picked up by Mexican authorities and handed over to a criminal gang in exchange for money. The criminal gang then held her in an undisclosed location, where they took her smartphone and threatened her and her daughter, demanding the contact information of someone who could pay their ransom. She gave them the number of her brother in Texas, who had no choice but to pay seven thousand dollars in order to save their lives. In our conversation, I was astounded when he told me that the release payment was made via PayPal, a popular digital payment and money exchange platform frequently used to make legal and traceable transactions. This online payment system works transnationally in many countries, serving as an electronic alternative to checks and money orders. Convenient though services like PayPal are, they also reveal (and increase) the vulnerability of migrant victims and the impunity of the criminal gangs and corrupt authorities who are certain that their online ransoms will not be traced. As this anecdote demonstrates, these new technologies are easily misappropriated in ways that their designers never intended and used to exploit migrants and their families.

Through their locative interfaces and GPS systems, smartphones also allow people to share their actual locations. This has become a very popular function used by people in transit to inform their relatives of their whereabouts. As migrants undertake a hazardous journey of more than 3,000 miles toward the United States, being able to share their location gives them and their loved ones a sense of security. A Honduran immigrant woman mentioned in her interview that while she was in transit, her brothers in Boston asked her to send them her location multiple times a day. She did this by using the location sharing option of WhatsApp. In this way, she could be assured that her brothers were monitoring her movement and that she was in touch with them every step of the way.

The real-time location sharing capability that smartphones offer was unimaginable just a few years ago. In the past, migration was an extremely isolating experience, where people went for days

without communication. Today, if migrants do not communicate with their relatives in Central America or in the United States regularly, their loved ones would feel extremely worried and anxious. Therefore, family members who reside in the United States usually pay for their migrant relatives' smartphone credit and expenses during their transit. An immigrant from Honduras shared that he covered all the traveling costs of his sister, who was migrating to the United States. He bought her smartphone credit through the internet to assure that she always had coverage, transferred her money for food and other expenses by using the Western Union money exchange phone application, secured her bus tickets, and paid the smugglers hired to help her cross the border. Each transaction was made through his smartphone, demonstrating its central role in the migration journey today.

Communication technologies, specifically smartphones, are making migrants in transit and their loved ones feel safer and more secure. Although these devices can pose risks, it is important to acknowledge that cross-border communication and emotional support is vital during transit and in times of crisis. Moreover, as scholars have noted, "social media, mobile apps, online maps, instant messaging, translation websites, wire money transfers, cell phone charging stations, and Wi-Fi hotspots have created a new infrastructure for movement as critical as roads or railways" (Latonero, 2016 as cited in Gillespie et al., 2018, 2). In sum, given the new digital infrastructure of the migratory journey, we can no longer conceive of contemporary migration without considering the role of smartphones.

Digital Communication, Connectivity Risks, and Life in the U.S

Diaspora life in the United States poses new challenges for Central American immigrants. Many of them are without documentation, do not enjoy legal protections, and must cope with insecurity, insolation, and the constant threat of deportation. For these immigrants, who reside thousands of miles away from their loved ones and have little hope of seeing them, the smartphone is an important resource to help cope with family separation. In this way, information and communication technologies are creating and implementing cross-border social practices of a truly transnational nature. Transnationalism can be understood as a series of "activities that require regular and sustained social contacts over time across national borders" (Portes, 1998, 219). For a practice or activity to be transnational, it requires a high frequency of exchanges, constant transactions, and many activities taking place across national borders (Portes, 1998). Building on this concept, we can say that the smartphone communications between migrants and their relatives in their countries of origin *are* transnational practices. Digital communication, practices, and interactions flow constantly across national borders.

These technologies allow for daily cross-border affective interactions that maintain transnational social and family dynamics and intensify the feeling of a "distant proximity" between the immigrants and their loved ones. In transnational families, "members of the nuclear unit (mother, father, and children) live in two different countries" (Dreby, 2006, 33) and maintain constant communication and interaction across borders (Schmalzbauer, 2004). For example, a woman from El Salvador who migrated to the United States in 2018 told me that she uses the video chat from WhatsApp to speak with her son every day, making sure that he works on his homework and does his chores. In her interview, she pointed out that on video chat, she can tell when her son is lying to her from the tone of his voice and his facial expression. She said that communication technologies are crucial for mothering from a distance, and that her family members have commented that "they don't understand how she can maintain so much control over her son from so far away." Mothering from afar has been further investigated by Schmalzbauer (2004). In her study of Honduran immigrant mothers in Boston whose children remained in Honduras, she notes that mothers use different strategies for nurturing their distant kids. She writes that "transnational families survive in a world in

which communication and transportation technology makes it easier for families to stay connected” (p. 1318), and argues that to a certain extent, these technologies alleviate the emotional challenges and burdens of transnational carework and parenting.

Migrant digital networks are not only essential for planning the migratory journey and adjusting to life in the United States. They are also fundamental for maintaining transnational social and family cohesion. Communication technologies enable a variety of crucial interactions for immigrants in the United States taking care of their children and loved ones from a distance. The smartphone introduced the possibility of high levels of social interactivity to occur within the migrant networks (Fornás et al., 2002), as users mutually respond to one another either in real time or after a delay. Social interactivity should be seen as a continuum of user interactions rather than a mere communication technology. Transnational social interactions have a high level of reciprocity and exchange. During the interviews I conducted for this essay, all the immigrants in the United States said that they communicated at least once a day with their children and relatives in Central America. This explains how technology acts like a “glue” that binds transnational families (Vertovec, 2004). Frequent social interactivity creates digital spaces of affection and closeness between physically separated people. It is important to point out that these interactions often concern mundane or “everyday” matters. In this regard, the act of communicating becomes as important as the content of the communication itself, as what maintains and strengthens the bonds through technology is the frequency and reciprocity of social interactions (Licoppe, 2004).

The experience of an immigrant woman from El Salvador currently living in Texas illustrates the importance of frequent cross-border communication in the context of migration. In her interview, she told me that she communicates daily with her cousin in El Salvador who looks after her two teenage sons. She texts and calls her cousin every night to ask how her sons are doing. They have an agreement that in exchange for her cousin caring for them, she will pay for all the house bills, including the Wi-Fi and the internet, as well as send money for food and other expenses. She also shared that in their agreement, her cousin must call her if anything happens or if one of the boys misbehaves, in which case she will have a private video call with him. As she put it:

“I couldn’t be a mother from a distance without a smartphone. It would be impossible. My biggest fear is that my sons get in trouble, join a gang, consume drugs, or suffer an accident. They are young and I worry. So, I really need to be in communication every day, otherwise I cannot sleep. But I also couldn’t be a mother from a distance without my cousin, someone that I trust that will take care of them. I don’t know if I would have migrated if I didn’t have someone I trusted to look after them and if I didn’t have technology to communicate with them. It’s hard to tell because technology is now always with you, but maybe without it I would not have left them.”

This account reveals that although technology can be of great assistance for mothering from a distance, education and nurturing would not be possible without the physical support and caring of the “other-mothers” (Schmalzbauer, 2004), that is, relatives (grandmothers, sisters, cousins, aunts) of the immigrant mothers who contribute to raising the children in the home countries. Technology can be a resource for mothering and parenting across national borders, but supportive relatives will always be the pillar of transnational families.

Even though communication technologies allow people to feel closer and support each emotionally across time, space, and national borders, it is crucial not to overlook the difficulties arising from migration and separation. Communication technologies do not completely alleviate the feelings of separation and displacement (Ponzanesi and Leurs, 2014) that migration can bring. Connectedness and cross-border mediated interactions also create anxieties and burdens for those

who are living in the United States far from their loved ones. Consequently, communication technologies can offer “an opportunity for transnational family intimacy but also a challenge, as people are held accountable for meeting family expectations in virtual interactions” (Witteborn, 2015, 351). Immigrants’ use of media for transnational communication is often linked to feelings of anxiety and stress. While connecting with their families abroad, immigrants frequently feel guilty for having left their loved ones behind—often in contexts of poverty and violence—as well as frustrated that they can only interact digitally and at a distance (Awad and Tossell, 2019).

Despite this anxiety and guilt, Central American immigrants in the United States still view communication technology as a vital tool for staying connected. One Honduran woman now residing in the United States conveyed that when she first arrived, she was very anxious about having a video call with her daughters in Honduras. She was nervous about the emotional reaction they might have when seeing each other on a screen. For the first few weeks, she only texted and called them. When they had their first video call, she felt intense, conflicting feelings of joy and sadness, and she recalled having to be strong and hold back her tears while she spoke to her daughters. After months of these video calls, she told me, she finally feels that she is not going to break into tears and that she now enjoys seeing her daughters: “You need a good smartphone and connection in order to see each other, to give each other company and love.” Consequently, she makes sure that her mobile phone is always paid up, and she bought a smartphone for each of her daughters and pays for Wi-Fi at their home in Honduras.

As some of these interviews demonstrate, immigrants carry an enormous weight, as they are expected to successfully provide economic and emotional support to their family members who remained in their home countries. New technologies thus create expectations of not only more frequent but also more affective interactions. Having had personal experience of what life can be like in their country of origin, the immigrant often initiates and intensifies communication in order to provide emotional support for family members as well as to alleviate their personal anxieties and fears about the situation back home.

Immigrants thus increasingly feel that it is necessary to pay for smartphones, Wi-Fi, and connectivity plans for their loved ones in Central America. This trend has greatly expanded technological penetration within the Central American region and further changed the social dynamics of individuals and families. For instance, in El Salvador, migration has intensified mobile phone usage and technological penetration as families consider digital connectivity a priority in order to remain in contact across borders. As a result, a Salvadorian survey (*Encuesta de Hogares de Propósitos Múltiples*, El Salvador, 2019) reported that there are more households in El Salvador with Wi-Fi than with refrigerators. Furthermore, in three separate interviews I found that when money was scarce, immigrants chose to pay their phone plans and those of their relatives in their countries of origin rather than buy food. Given these findings, it is crucial to examine how these technologies are reshaping economic decisions, as well as the social worlds of the people who remain and of those who leave.

Connectivity is also necessary for immigrants to navigate their lives in their destination country. For Central American immigrants, digital networks are essential for finding a job, a place to live, and community support in the United States. One Honduran woman living in Texas shared that “it is simply impossible to find a job in the U.S. without a smartphone.” Currently, she works in construction, an occupation she learned in the United States out of need. She told me that this used to be a job only for male immigrants, but that recently more women are joining this workforce. In this job, she sometimes works up to 17 hours a day, but overall, she is glad she can provide economical support to her family in Honduras. In our conversation, she said that she sends more than half of her salary to her family by using the Western Union money transfer application and described how technology is important for maintaining family bonds and economic well-being:

“During the week, I mostly use voice messages, texts, and voice calls. Everyday. Even if you are far away, you must be aware of what your sons are doing day-to-day. If there is any problem, you must be able to take care of it by using the phone. If it is an issue with money, I take care of it through the phone, too. So, I am in two places at the same time. For immigrant women who are single mothers like me, you must be in two places at the same time. You must learn how to take care of problems by using technology. You must take care of your family who is in another country. At the same time, you must take care of your job in the United States.”

Though technology can help these immigrants to find a job, access information, remain in touch with their social networks, and communicate with their loved ones in Central America, it also poses new risks. Technology has become a crucial tool for law enforcement and governmental migration controls (Golash-Boza, 2009). In the United States, authorities and corporations are exploiting new media technologies for their agenda to securitize migration. With the aim of controlling migratory flows and deporting immigrants without documents, the U.S. government is paying millions of dollars to tech corporations to develop and implement technologies for tracking immigrants. These contracts between the government and private corporations are also blurring the boundaries between private/public and state/non-state actors (Walsh, 2014).

For instance, the U.S. government has invested millions of dollars in law enforcement, migrant prisons, tracking technologies, and deportation facilities. In 2020, it was reported that the Trump administration had purchased data relating to millions of smartphone users from the corporation Venntel Inc. specifically for immigration enforcement purposes (Tau and Hackman, 2020). With this data, federal agencies can access personal information collected through the everyday use of smartphone apps in order to track undocumented migrants. According to this report, the Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP), two divisions under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), have used this data to locate and arrest undocumented migrants in the United States.

Another case worth pointing out is the Palantir data company. Palantir designed the “Investigative Case Management” (ICM) software, which integrated public and private data into one system to facilitate ICE and Homeland Security efforts to track down immigrants in order to incarcerate and deport them. The MIT “Technological Report” (October, 2018) revealed that this software increased ICE arrests by 42 percent compared to the same period in the previous year (Hao, 2018). Also, according to this report, the online store Amazon is the system’s “backbone,” providing the infrastructure (e.g., servers, data, software) for Palantir to operate and run the Investigative Case Management (ICM) program for ICE. Thus, contracts with technology and data corporations such as Palantir and Amazon are becoming a huge part of the annual budget for ICE and the Department of Homeland Security. These examples expose how technology creates new ways to exploit and imperil immigrants in the United States. While smartphones are crucial for fostering transitional social interactions and organization, they also open the door to data extraction and surveillance (Hegde, 2016).

Conclusion: Technology Is an Essential Variable in the Study of Human Migration

Throughout this essay, I laid out some of the reasons why communication technology, more specifically the smartphone, has become an important factor in the context of migration. The smartphone’s mobility and portability make it an affordable tool for navigation and location sharing that migrants can use while they travel and adapt to new contexts. In terms of reachability, it allows immigrants to be connected in real-time with their loved ones across distances and national borders, which can make them feel safer and closer to their relatives. It also enables a continuum of

cross-border conversations and social interactions that enhance the sense of a distant-proximity. Overall, smartphones offer Central Americans an affordable, effective, and immediate way to connect and organize, which has in turn greatly influenced their decisions to migrate.

In addition, by exploring the case of Central American migration to the United States, I showed that communication technologies are a “game-changer” in terms of human mobility. Particularly, they have changed three fundamental areas of the migration process: (1) the decision and drive to migrate, (2) the journey itself, and (3) life as a diaspora. In this regard, I conclude that communication technology is a prevalent and significant variable that should be acknowledged when studying contemporary human mobility.

Communication technologies have transformed traditional migratory patterns and trends, affecting the ways migrant networks emerge, function, and organize across national borders. Future research related to migration must take into consideration technology as a crucial factor that is influencing mobility and transforming cross-border practices. In addition, technology is significantly affecting immigration law enforcement practices. The interconnections between communication technologies and migration constitute a substantive and relevant area of study that deserves thoughtful interdisciplinary attention, especially as technology evolves and human mobility increases.

At every stage of the migration process, from the decision to migrate to the journey itself to the everyday struggles of life as an immigrant in the United States, technologies play an essential role. For the migrants themselves, the benefits and difficulties go hand in hand, as communication technologies offer access to information, transnational organization, and social support through mediated interpersonal and family communication. However, these same tools also put them at greater risk of surveillance, exploitation, deportation, and criminal violence.

In the context of human mobilities, therefore, communication technologies present a complex scenario marked by deep contradictions and tensions. These technologies are also becoming an essential factor in the economies of cross-border migrant networks, allowing multinational telecommunication companies to profit from the mobile phone plans that offer transnational communication and connectivity. Within this complicated setting, it is crucial to study the interconnections between technology and human migration, not through an overly “celebratory” approach but instead by applying an analytical framework that acknowledges the ambivalence and complexities that technologies pose for human mobility.

Academics, journalists, politicians, and activists have been questioning whether communication technologies are *good* or *bad* for the immigrants and their families. The literature and testimonies presented in this essay show that there is no definitive answer. Indeed, the study of communication technologies in the context of migration should not focus on classifying communication technologies as either a positive or negative factor; rather, it should analyze them as a now ubiquitous element throughout the entire migratory experience.

Although migration and communication technologies have been recently attracting more scholarly interest (Alonso and Oiarzabal, 2010; Brinkerhoff, 2009; Madianou and Miller, 2012; Witteborn, 2015; Hegde, 2016; Gillespie et al., 2018), there is still the need to explore its complexities: research that acknowledges that although technology can assist the migrants in various ways, it does not automatically make their experiences of migration easier or better. In this regard, future investigations should recognize that from the most personal uses of technology—communicating across distances and accessing information, resources, and locative applications—to broader-scale uses—implementing infrastructures for telecommunication, surveillance, data extraction, and border control by governments and corporations—technology is transforming the phenomenon of migration altogether.

Migration has always been a crucial element of human survival, and technology is just one more (important) variable that is transforming its processes and how it is experienced. The agency,

creativity, resiliency, and willpower that migrants have demonstrated in improving their lives and the lives of their loved ones is not determined by technology. As long as violence and insecurity persist in Central America, migrants will continue to move toward a better future, with or without technology. I will conclude with the words of a young woman from El Salvador who eloquently described the importance of technology for her as an irregular immigrant in the United States:

“The smartphone is the only tool we have as immigrants to feel close to home. We do not have any other option. Even if the telecommunication companies are becoming millionaires with our money as we use the phone to connect to our loved ones every day, or even if the governments track us down through our phones, it’s worth it. This is a price I will pay to be close to my family. As long as borders and migration law enforcement exist, as long as we are forced to migrate, we will keep using these technologies. We have no other option.”

Note

- 1 All interviews were conducted, transcribed, and translated into English by the author between January and July 2021. All the interviews were conducted through videocall conversations using the WhatsApp platform.

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