

Book Review: The Digital Border: Migration, Technology, Power by Lilie Chouliaraki and Myria Georgiou

In The Digital Border: Migration, Technology, Power, Lilie Chouliaraki and Myria Georgiou explore how digital technologies are shaping experiences of migration today, focusing particularly on the 2015 European migration 'crisis'. This accessible and beautifully written book avoids totalising visions and opens up space for nuance and change, showing how the border could be imagined differently if we want it to be, writes Isadora Dullaert.

The Digital Border: Migration, Technology, Power. Lilie Chouliaraki and Myria Georgiou. NYU Press. 2022.

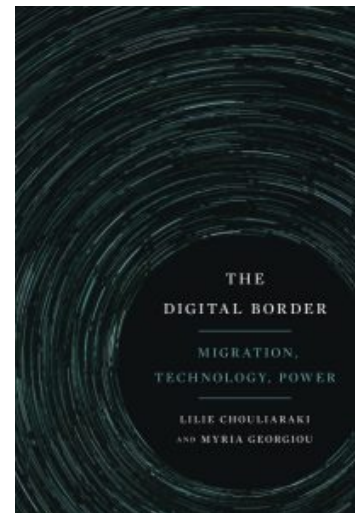
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If you lived in Europe around 2015, you most likely remember the countless headlines about the migration 'crisis' that dominated the news. 'Crisis' should be in inverted commas, Lilie Chouliaraki and Myria Georgiou suggest: it is a performative term, in line with the collective imagination of what migration means for 'western publics', rather than for migrants themselves. It is this, and other imaginations of the border, that they challenge in their book, [The Digital Border: Migration, Technology, Power](#).

Chouliaraki and Georgiou introduce an expansive conception of Europe's digital border: an assemblage that includes both several locations and a network of actors. Crucially, the book not only shows how migrants are continuously followed and impacted by the border, but also points out acts of and possibilities for resistance. Therefore, this timely book makes well-needed room for nuance, offering an alternative to the often-repeated idea of totalising technology.

The Digital Border is divided into two main sections: the territorial border, spanning from points of arrival to Europe's big cities, and the 'symbolic border', which is primarily written into existence by the media. In the first chapter, Chouliaraki and Georgiou provide an empirical account of the outer border, based on fieldwork on the Greek island of Chios. In doing so, they challenge prominent discourse in border studies, often underpinned by Giorgio Agamben's conception of refugee camps as spaces of 'exception' where refugees are reduced to 'bare life': stripped of political agency and only seen as bodies in need. Similarly, digital borders group individuals into 'risky' and 'safe' categories, separating them from their biographical context.

It is this narrative of totalising (digital) power that Chouliaraki and Georgiou question. Rather than emphasising the potential effects of the digital border, they view it as a 'dialectical space of struggle' (35). This 'opens up the possibility to read the outer border also as a space for tactical self-expression, political agency, and resistance' (35).



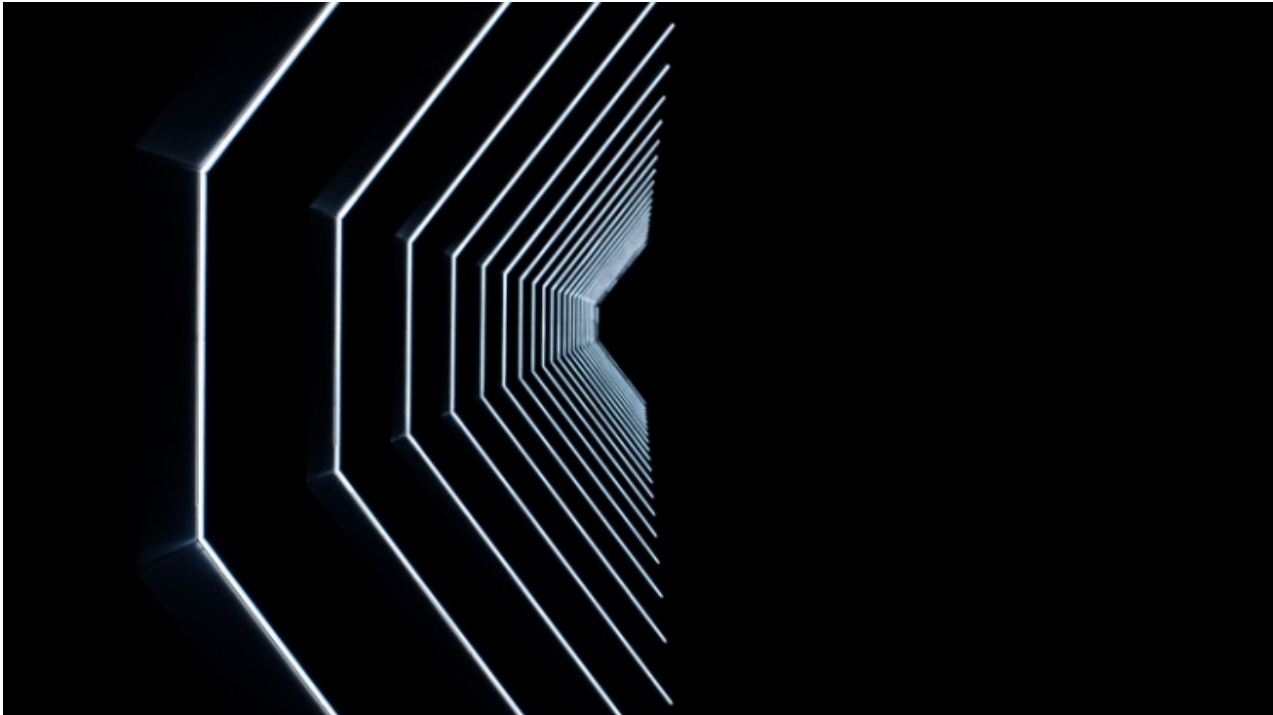


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While institutional actors, such as border personnel and large NGOs, contribute to the silencing of migrants and the securitisation of migration, not all actors align with this mode of power. 'Compassionate activism', the authors argue, is the clearest example of resistance. Local volunteers and activist groups set up additional infrastructures to help migrants, because they empathised with them and were unhappy with the administrative power of institutional NGOs. For example, one group organised social events for migrants and activists, which functioned as spaces where migrants could decompress after arriving on the island, thus making room for self-expression. Seeing these actors as part of the border assemblage thus makes it possible to add nuance to the silencing effect of the border.

Chouliaraki and Georgiou further demonstrate the ambivalence of the digital border in the next chapter, where they extend the border into the cities of Athens, Berlin and London. They find that migrants' lives are impacted by 'entrepreneurial security'. In the city, employment is essential: not just to generate an income, but to be viewed as a successful migrant, soon-to-be citizen. This neoliberal trend, they argue, is intimately connected to increased digitisation. Online, migrants can find training and work. However, by sharing work-related information over the internet, they also make themselves traceable and therefore vulnerable to surveillance. However, due to the neoliberal imperative, there is little choice but to do this.

In these two chapters, Chouliaraki and Georgiou not only show that the border might be more extensive than one might think, but they also demonstrate the ambivalence of technology: it can yield power as a tool of administration; it can be helpful in organising social events; it can appear empowering when looking for jobs but it actually facilitates surveillance. It is this constant nuancing of the border space and its technology that makes the book powerful.

The second part of the book revolves around 'the symbolic border': the border that exists in the public perception. This, Chouliaraki and Georgiou suggest, is produced by digital media through (reductive) representations of migrants. In Chapter Four, dedicated to news narratives, they conceptualise the language of journalism as a border technology in itself.

Chouliaraki and Georgiou distinguish three linguistic devices that work together: silencing; generalisation; and decontextualisation. They found that the media favoured the opinions of political elites, silencing other voices belonging to migrants and European citizens. Furthermore, in the majority of cases, migrants were not portrayed as individuals, but rather narrated as 'flows'. Finally, migrants were rarely represented as persons fleeing war zones, but were portrayed in a negative way, as an inconvenience to Europe. This, the authors suggest, presents a triple misrecognition of migrants, for they are not represented as social, political or historical actors.

However, just as the territorial border is not totalising, there is space for resistance in the symbolic border too. In the final chapter, the authors address instances in which migrants' voices are amplified through NGOs and grassroots social media. They are critical of NGOs' efforts, as they find that migrants are asked to confirm particular stories: telling prospective migrants about the dangerous journey, warning them to think twice before they attempt it themselves.

Conversely, grassroots initiatives, such as a migrant-led radio station or the *Migrant Voice* social media project, let migrants tell their own story. This is important, the authors argue, for they can challenge narratives that have been written about them, rather than with them. While voices of resistance are not as prolific as the mainstream media, they offer a counterweight, creating space for the complexities of migrant struggles. These examples show yet another side of digital technology and add another layer to the border: through different channels and stories, it becomes possible to see the border as a reality that can continuously be redefined.

The criticism of prominent conceptions of borders, especially the totalising and silencing potential of technology, corresponds to some recent literature in the field. For example, it converges with 'autonomy of migration' approaches, such as [Stephan Scheel's \(2018\) article](#), in which he points out that migrants often find new ways around digital systems. Similarly, in a recent commentary, [Keren Weitzberg et al \(2021\)](#) identify the polarisation in the debate on the use of digital identification practices in international aid. Scholars disproportionately focus on surveillance, whereas (the power of) digital identity systems are more ambivalent. *The Digital Border* is therefore a timely contribution to a field where more nuance is desirable.

Through the combination of specific, localised research and broader analysis of the European mediascape, Chouliaraki and Georgiou convincingly challenge the conception of a fully digital, controlling border. Their approach, including both border technology and the media, is unusual in the border studies field, and could therefore open up the floor to a more holistic debate.

It could be argued that there is the risk of being too general as all of the chapters contain big research topics in themselves. However, if the scope of *The Digital Border* had not been this wide, it would have been more difficult to propose a comprehensive view of the border assemblage. There is, however, one case – the abovementioned section on refugee voices of resistance – where it would have been interesting to read more. Covering half a chapter, the discussion is fairly succinct for a topic that seems to be important to the overall argument of the book.

The Digital Border is, however, a book that contains something for everyone. It is clearly written and flows beautifully, which makes it easy to read, despite the complexity of the material. While the book is accessible to persons from different fields, it does presuppose some familiarity with often-used concepts in border and migration studies, such as 'securitisation', which is not explained in detail. However, the important contribution that *The Digital Border* makes is that it helps to open up space for nuance and change: it shows the reader how things could be different; how the border could be imagined differently if we want it to be.

If you are interested in this book, you can watch this LSE Research video of Professor Myria Georgiou discussing why the media coverage of Ukrainian refugees has been different to other conflicts, recorded for World Refugee Day 2022:





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