Power and resistance at Europe's digital border

Digital technology now plays a central role in border control. Drawing on a new book, **Lilie Chouliaraki** *and* **Myria Georgiou** *examine the influence of Europe's 'digital border' on migrants seeking to enter the continent.*

While the Illegal Migration Bill was being debated in the UK earlier this year, off the Calabrian coast in southern Italy, another 'journey to hope' for dozens of migrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Iran ended in tragedy after their boat sank, claiming the lives of at least 59 of them. In line with the long-standing politics of cruelty that has governed Europe's borders, national governments used the tragedy to pledge tougher immigration and asylum policies and to close off all 'illegal and unsafe routes' to the continent.

The UK's Illegal Migration Bill and the accompanying communication strategy focused on 'stopping the boats' have been a case in point, with promises to see thousands of migrants 'banned' or 'stopped' at the border. However, even those who do make it into the UK typically end up being detained for far too long at Dover's detention facilities. They have often been crowded into small rooms with no access to open air and little or no natural light, before being sent to B&B hotels or ex-military sites, such as the Penally Training Camp in Wales and the Napier Barracks in Folkestone. This 'contingency accommodation' is frequently inadequate and results in people being held under jail-like conditions.

It is not just the UK, however. From France to Greece and from Italy to Denmark, dystopian rhetoric dominates the border policies of European nation states. This has been accompanied by rising violence against migrants, including beatings and sexual assaults, and life-threatening pushbacks.

The politics of control

The policies of European nation states essentially serve to control, marginalise, devalue and exclude migrants and refugees, both at the point of migrants' entry – *the outer*

border – and in the urban spaces where many of them settle – *the inner border*.

But how do migrants respond to this politics of control? How do they contest practices of surveillance? Can we understand the border as something more than brutal sovereign power? And can the border also be a site of struggle over migrants' rights and voices? These are among the questions we address in a new book, *The Digital Border: Migration, Technology, Power*.

To do so, we draw on extensive research conducted between 2017 and 2020 across the cities of Athens, Berlin and London. These are urban spaces where migrants arrive, live among others and share stories of their encounters with power, contestation and resistance in everyday life.

One of our findings is that the so called Prevent Strategy, the UK's counter-terrorism policy introduced in 2003, has promoted a security culture that has, in time, saturated migrant spaces of work, education, worship and social media activity. It has not only normalised suspicion toward migrant communities – requiring teachers, lecturers, doctors and religious leaders, among others, to report those expressing radical and extremist opinions – but has also legitimised colonial and orientalist norms, connecting certain religions, races and cultures to terrorist acts and aggressive behaviours.

Grassroots initiatives

Existing alongside this intensely securitised culture, however, there are lively collectivities of communication, collaboration and self-expression that connect citizens and noncitizens seeking to challenge the normative contours of the border. The examples we encountered across cities are many.

Baynatna, the Arabic library in Berlin, was established by a group of young people from across the Middle East in 2016, bringing together into its space citizens and noncitizens around events of conviviality such as music and poetry nights. Its ambition: creating an unconditional space of welcome. In Athens, we heard how the Mobile Info team offer invaluable legal advice to newcomers on asylum and rights, information that is often least accessible to those who need it most.

This vision to open up places – digital and non-digital – for migrants to meet one another

and speak openly about their experiences of border policies and racist media discourses is also shared by other kinds of projects, such as the online UK-based project Migrant Voice. In the words of Migrant Voice, “The charity seeks to ensure that migrants are able to speak for themselves, and support others to, so that migrants’ voices are heard by both the public and policymakers on the issues which affect them”.

This project is seeking to contest migrant misrepresentation and misrecognition by connecting individual storytelling and portrait-driven narratives to collective initiatives and political debates. The story of Syed, for instance, a student of Pakistani origin facing deportation because of the Home Office unjustly claiming that he had cheated on an English language test, describes a system where migrants’ voices are ignored or diminished.

Syed indicates that he “used to stay awake at night because I was scared that immigration enforcement officers would raid my house and arrest me.” His voice stands out individually, but also helps to frame a much bigger debate. Syed is not alone but instead one of many in a similar situation. As Migrant Voice state, “over 34,000 international students were wrongly accused of cheating [in their English language tests] by the Home Office and a further 22,000 wrongly labelled possible cheats.”

Risks and tensions

In the context of far-right politics and rising racism, xenophobia, and hate speech, initiatives like Migrant Voice are vital for sustaining networks of migrant solidarity and fostering spaces of migrant voice and recognition. But what are the costs associated with these initiatives?

First, this kind of grassroots solidarity faces the risk of co-option by the state and the market, not least because the digital platforms migrants and activists use are also used by governments for data extraction and surveillance. But the risk of co-optation also comes from the increasing pressure on grassroots initiatives to compete for attention with government-sponsored projects, like #I Am A Migrant, a project developed by the International Organisation of Migration (IOM).

This project promotes appealing stories of migrants, yet under the condition that those migrants appear as grateful to the receiving country, successful and determined to make

it no matter the enormous regulatory obstacles to their participation in western societies. Giving in to such a mainstream hyper-individualised style of migrant visibility may accrue benefits for activists in terms of audience reach and state funds, but also compromises their confrontational narratives of collective resistance to the violence of the border.

Second, there is the less visible but very real emotional labour required by the activists and volunteers involved in such initiatives. This form of labour, which stems from the risks threatening migrants and activists alike, strives to strike an almost impossible balance between competing tensions.

These include tensions between harnessing technological agency while avoiding state and corporate surveillance; maximising media attention while minimising concessions to dominant political and market discourses; organising resistance to the border while being subject to its power and needing to protect the most vulnerable in migrant communities. We heard again and again that volunteers, activists and teachers are constantly exhausted, how emotionally drained they often are with the conditions they encounter and how limited their ability is to challenge the deep structures of the border.

Productive spaces

Migrants seeking a new home in European metropoles, at least those who manage to survive the fatal risks of the outer border, find new lives that are both ordinary and exceptional. As they settle in neighbourhoods while simultaneously remaining subject to perpetual surveillance and limited access to resources, urban networks of solidarity, support, visibility and recognition become yet more important.

Despite their own tensions (technological, emotional, and political), these networks render the inner border of the city more than simply a site of surveillance and control. As the examples we shared here demonstrate, encounters among existing and new inhabitants, whether face-to-face or digitally mediated, make host cities productive spaces not only of exclusion but also of struggle, agency and resistance.

For more information, see the authors' new book, The Digital Border: Migration, Technology, Power (New York University Press, 2022)

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