Mediating Migration: New Roles for Mass Media

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Abstract

This paper highlights the importance of going beyond the standard focus of media and migration debates, which tend to center on mass media representations of immigrants in Western or European print or broadcast publications. Instead, several recent examples are discussed that show how governments use mass media to reach out to potential migrant audiences and discourage them from embarking on their journey. Media representations thus become a factor with which to intervene in migration flows, by providing particular gendered narratives of danger and tragic failure, but also of course as a source of information on possible migration routes and possible lives to be built elsewhere.

[1/2]

We are used to thinking about media and migration mainly in terms of representational issues. The great bulk of the existing literature on media and migration focuses on the representation of migration and migrants in Western mass media or popular genres such as film. And this has generated important results. But this focus has meant that we have tended to neglect a bit other uses of media in relation to migration: media that are used for purposes of communication, for memory work, but also importantly for surveillance and border control technologies that are linked to governance. All of these uses shape contemporary migration regimes and how migrants can negotiate them.

There are two aspects that I'd like to focus on in particular today, and both of them have to do with the changing 'nature' of European border regimes. It has been pointed out many times that the notion of 'Fortress Europe' is in several ways a fiction, one that doesn't take account of the agency of migrants, but also disregards the new qualities of border control politics that we've seen since the Schengen agreement in particular.

[3]

William Walters[i] wrote a few years ago of the need to 'denaturalize' our understanding of borders, especially when it comes to understanding European border regimes. He and others have highlighted the

aspect of **exterritorialization** when it comes to new border control politics supported by the EU. Regulating migration flows is increasingly seen as a task that involves intervention beyond the actual territory of the EU. And media play an important role in this intervention.

The issue of Third country refugee and deportation camps continues to be in the news – one that is sold by EU politicians as a humanitarian gesture, but seen by migration activists as an abrogation of responsibilities. Forcing or paying Third countries such as Libya to arrest and deport migrants allows EU governments to pay lipservice to humanitarian principles, while the inhumane treatment of people in camps is rendered invisible. While Libya has a highly problematic record on human rights issues[ii], the Italian government finances detention camps in the country, deportations to Sub-Saharan Africa and Libyan border patrol training as well as weapons.[iii] The EU and individual member states are no longer seen as responsible.

Encampments and deportation don't seem to involve media in any obvious way, but the politics of border deterritorialization involve them at several levels.

There is, first of all, the level of data gathering, information storage and exchange. We are not so used to thinking about media in this context. But media technologies are central to building up things like the Schengen Information System that links most member states. The SIS represents a new stage in storing and linking different types of information that allow for biometrical profiling across the EU.

[4]

Regarding the **exterritorialization** of borders, media technologies are also involved in the development of new forms of surveillance outside EU territory.

- Military surveillance technology adapted to purpose of policing borders, e.g. optoelectronic sensors and radar used for Integrado de Vigilancia Exterior (SIVE) in Spain, Morocco, Greece. Some of you might have heard of the SIVE project and the notion of 'virtual sea borders'. Optronic surveillance technology has been implemented on Spain's southern coast and is used to scan the North African coastlines.

- Unmanned air- and water-based drones in Third-country waters that detect migrant boats across the Mediterranean sea, currently trial-stage

- Paying for and helping to implement population control databases in Third Countries

This use of media technologies is of course not oriented towards communication. It has to do with rendering migrant populations knowable and manageable, and with postmodern practices of statehood. It would be interesting here to discuss these tendencies in relation to Deleuze's reflections on the transition form disciplinary to control societies.[iv]

[His argument is that control societies are taking over from disciplinary societies, and he links it to the observation that the 'classical' disciplinary institutions that Foucault has famously described as moulding populations up until the mid-20th century are losing their central role as sites of confinement, while new forms of biopolitics allow for deterritorialized, dispersed forms of control.]

But I want to address another aspect of border exterritorialization, in which media play a more 'classical' communicative and representational role.

[5]

In the past two years, governments in Europe and the United States have developed new strategies to prevent potential migrants from trying to leave their places of origin in the first place. This is a 'hearts and minds' approach in the sense that it is the one effort in the repertoire of border control measures that has a direct communicative dimension. The point is to convince potential migrants that it is better not to embark on the journey.

I want to show you an example of how that is currently being done:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/player/nol/newsid_7000000/newsid_7003900/7003961.stm?bw=bb&mp=wm&asb=1&news=1

[6]

Apart from TV ads, the Spanish government and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) have started advertising campaigns on public busses in Senegal. The message says something like 'it makes no sense'.

[7]

Something similar is featured in print magazines, but the pictures are more drastic. Those who embark on the dangerous journey are likely to face death, the images announce, but the story they tell amounts to more than that.

[8]

- Warning of the dangers of journey while treating the deliberate factors that make these journeys dangerous as if they were given naturally
- Complete neglect of factors that ‚push' people to migrate
- ‚You will be missed': mourning family members, Africa's future

 [9]

How they end up: fishing boats in Spain

The very image of the capsized and wrecked fishing boats that have lost their human cargo might evoke different associations among poor Africans. It is useful to remind ourselves of what prompts people to try their luck and look for a better future in Europe.

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Fishing boats in Ghana – no contest for Asian and European fishing industries

The European Union has a direct impact on local economies in many African countries that are countries of emigration. The fishing industry is just one example of many that can be mobilized to show how Western and Asian commercial interests are ruining the livelihoods of local African populations. To tell young people then that they are the future of Africa has a very cynical ring to it, even when using a famous African musician to get out the message.

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The United States government has embarked on something quite similar, targeting Mexico but also US cities with large populations of Mexican immigrants. This image here is part of a campaign "no more crosses", and it is playing on the double meaning of the term: no more crossings, and no more deaths. Attempts to cross the border are likely to result in death, the baseline message goes.

The results of that campaign have been far from convincing. Mexicans who were asked to respond to the US campaigns have for the most part responded critically, and have dismissed them as much too obvious attempts to bring the numbers of undocumented border crossings down.

Last year, CNN reported on a new kind of US campaign initiative that was trying out a different route. I have to quote from the transcript of the broadcast, because I don't have the actual recording:

Aired May 1, 2006 - 09:30   ET

M. O'BRIEN: The U.S. Border Patrol may be singing the blues as it tries to stop illegal immigrants from crossing the border, but now they are changing the music, hoping songs can stop the march. As AMERICAN MORNING's Dan Lothian tells us, it is taking the border war to a new level. And it's a story you'll see only on CNN.

…

DAN LOTHIAN, CNN CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): The warning isn't on the label, but in the music. And the message is serious. Songs aimed at Mexicans thinking about sneaking into the U.S., a gritty, but little known media campaign produced by the U.S. Border Patrol, which says they're airing on some 30 radio stations across Mexico.

SALVADOR ZAMORA, U.S. BORDER PATROL: They sing the very hard- hitting message: If you come across the border area, especially through the desert, you will die.

LOTHIAN: In "En La Raya," a man fleeing poverty in Mexico runs across another man barely alive in the hot desert.

LOTHIAN (on camera): The U.S. government is targeting so-called key feeder states, like Zakatekas (ph) and Chapas (ph). At first, buying the airtime for five different songs, but then, listeners began requesting the tunes, most unaware of the messenger.

ZAMORA: They don't understand, nor do they know that it is a U.S.-based government, law enforcement entity, providing this message.

…..

LOTHIAN: But the border patrol says early reports show this unique effort is getting the attention of the Mexican people.

Dan Lothian, CNN, Boston.

Now this is quite a different approach - the vehicle of popular culture is used both to disguise the origin of the message and to create what Roland Barthes would have called an overdetermined myth. A myth that links the notion of border crossing firmly to death and desperation.

Despite this tricky way of "taking the border war to a new level", as the CNN reporter said, it is of course quite unlikely that such media interventions are going to have the desired result and act as a deterrant. I think their significance lies mostly elsewhere:

- they contribute to a naturalization of migration-related deaths

- they make it difficult to focus attention on the actual causes that prompt people to embark on dangerous journeys and border crossings

In this sense, they are just as much intended for audiences 'at home' - the humanitarian discourses that present migration as a journey of inevitable victimization absorb much of the popular moral outrage in response to images of dead bodies found on tourist beaches. 'Don't get on the boat' starts to appear as a very sensible message. The same can be said for the anti-trafficking discourse that aims to prevent trafficking, but doesn't address the causes that make trade in human beings possible, or sex work a possible option for certain groups of migrants.

The mass media strategies that appear to be aimed at potential migrants might not be effective in curbing migration attempts, but they help to create a climate beyond the borders of Europe in which EU border control measures seem either like benign efforts to help migrants or become naturalized and thereby invisible.

[i] William Walters: "Mapping Schengenland: Denaturalizing the Border" *Environment & Planning D: Society & Space* 20(5), 2002, pp.561-80.

[ii] (http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engmde190022004)

[iii] Rutvica Andrijasevic: "Lampedusa in Focus: Migrants caught between the Libyan desert and the deep sea" *Feminist Review* no. 82, pp. 119-124.

[iv] Gilles Deleuze: "Postscript on the Societies of Control" October, Vol. 59, Winter, 1992 (Winter, 1992), pp. 3-7.