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'Travelling with the Traveller': an ethnographic framework for the study of migrants' digital inclusion

Panayiota Tsatsou, Dr
Nerina Boursinou

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‘Travelling with the Traveller’: an Ethnographic Framework for the Study of Migrants’ Digital Inclusion

Abstract
This paper argues that researchers who study migrants’ digital inclusion need to shed light on migrants’ use of digital technologies within the time frame and context of the ‘migration travel’ and while migrants are in transition to a new or safer place for resettlement. In support of this argument, the paper proposes a ‘travelling with the traveller’ research framework that applies the ethnographic methodology and aims at the researcher experiencing or even becoming an integral part of the migration travel. The paper presents the ‘travelling with the traveller’ framework and discusses how this framework can enable a better understanding of the implications of digital inclusion (or the absence of it) on how migrants experience, combat or alleviate all sorts of adversities, volatile emotions, unanticipated problems and moments of uncertainty crisis they so often encounter when on the move from homeland to another land, from one life setting to another. Further, the paper presents the fieldwork processes and data collection techniques of the proposed ‘travelling with the traveller’ framework, such as participant observation, informal and open-ended interviews, as well as the use of video and photographic footage.

Keywords: digital inclusion, ethnography, migration, media studies, travel.

Author bio
Panayiota Tsatsou (Ph.D. LSE) is an Associate Professor of Media and Communication at the University of Leicester. Her research interests lie in the broader field of digital media and her publications aim at intellectual and research advancement in the following areas: digital divides/digital inclusion, Internet studies, digital research, digital media and civic participation, and digital policy and regulation. More info on her work can be found at http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/media/people/dr-panayiota-tsatsou

Maria - Nerina Boursinou is a PhD candidate in the School of Media, Communication and Sociology of the University of Leicester, with a background in Media, Communication and Culture. Her research focuses on the ‘Digital Inclusion of migrants inside Refugee Camps, Immigration Detention Centres and Housing squats in Greece’. Additional research interests include grassroots activism and human rights of minority groups. More info on her work can be found at: http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/media/people/Research-Students/maria-nerina-boursinou
1. Introduction

The conversation about migrants, diasporic communities and digital technology is not new, nor yet complete. Peeters and d’Haenens (2005) have argued that media technologies can encourage ethnic minorities to get involved in a dual practice: that of bridging with the host country and that of bonding with the home country. Further, research has drawn upon discussions concerning ‘virtual ethnicity’ (Poster, 1998), ‘long-distance nationalism’ (Anderson, 1998) and the development of an online ‘diasporic public sphere’ (Appadurai, 1997), and it has explored the development of migrant or diasporic communities in cybernetic space (e.g., Mitra, 2005; Skop and Adams, 2009).

However, the presence and role of digital technologies in a migrant’s life have been studied mostly after the migrant lands in the host country. In this respect, there is a lack of insight into the role that digital technologies might play in the entire ‘migration experience’ and especially during the actual travel (physical, but also with practical, identity and symbolic facets) from the home to the host country and when the user of digital technology obtains the status of migrant. This paper argues for the need to research migrants’ use of digital technologies within the timeframe and context of the ‘migration travel’ and while in transition to a new land for resettlement. For the pursuit of such research, the paper proposes a ‘travelling with the traveller’ research framework that applies the ethnographic methodology and aims at the researcher experiencing or even becoming an integral part of the migration travel.

We argue that the proposed ‘travelling with the traveller’ framework can offer a genuine insight into migrants’ digital inclusion (or the absence of it) and how the ‘digital’ influences migrants’ bearing of all sorts of experiences, adversities, emotions, unanticipated problems and moments of uncertainty that they encounter during their trip from homeland to another land, when they transit from one life setting to another. Thus, we present the fieldwork processes and data collection techniques that the proposed ‘travelling with the traveller’ framework can accommodate, such as participant observation, informal and open-ended interviews, as well as the use of video and photographic footage.

In what follows, we offer an introductory discussion of ethnography and the ethnographic turn in media studies, as well as a brief reflection on critical voices that have posed questions about the present and future of media ethnography. This is followed by a critical review of the extant study of migration and migrants’ digital inclusion, which demonstrates the grounds on which a ‘travelling with the traveller’ ethnographic approach can make a contribution to research endeavours in this area. This brings us to presenting the epistemological and methodological
2. Ethnography and media studies

2.1 Ethnography

Ethnographic research ‘takes place in the natural setting of the everyday activities of the subjects under investigation’ (Gill and Johnson, 1991: 124). Ethnography is a particular research approach, not a particular method of research, as it uses several different methods. Typical methods in ethnographic research include interviews (structured or exploratory), observation (keeping diaries, writing field notes), collecting narratives, undertaking document and/or historical research, and participating in the context so as to accumulate first-hand, contextual information about the culture or population in question (Crowley-Henry, 2009: 38). In this sense, the ethnographer is ‘interested in understanding and describing a social and cultural scene from the emic, or insider’s, perspective’ (Fetterman, 1998: 2).

Ethnography has been used in the study of many aspects of the social and cultural life. Brought to life by anthropologists in the mid-19th century, ethnography soon became of interest to many disciplines in social sciences and humanities. Although it never really changed its true identity – which is to study and interpret unknown cultures and the human behaviour inside those cultures, as seen through the eyes of a stranger – it has been influenced by the various disciplinary traditions in which it has been employed. Thus, it has obtained multiple principles and forms of application.

While classic ethnography was characterised by rigidity, as it aimed to report reality with pure objectivity, it slowly adopted a more reflexive stance, recognising the role of interpretivism and that the researcher’s human nature, personality and personal history unavoidably play a role in the conduct and outcomes of ethnographic study (Crowley-Henry, 2009: 39). From the 1970s, feminist ethnography started to examine women’s position in society with a desire to educate women on the inequalities they were experiencing and mobilise them towards action (Gobo, 2008). We cannot but notice two significant ways in which feminist ethnography differed from how ethnography was conducted in a male dominated culture: first, the feminist ethnographer made the effort to minimise power relations between the researcher and the participant; and second, the focus was placed on the procedure and evolution of action in a precise spatial location and timeframe (Gobo, 2008). Radical and gender-challenging
approaches gave space to critical ethnography, which aimed at empowering marginalised populations by providing them with an opportunity to be heard. Instead of maintaining a neutral position and describing ‘what is’, critical ethnographers advocated change by saying “what could be” (Thomas, 1993: 4).

Alike its numerous forms and ontological and epistemological positions, ethnography is methodologically open and integrates a mixture of qualitative techniques. It is a multi-method approach that digs deep into a particular culture or sub-culture through combining qualitative data, such as participant observation (and field notes), interview data and document sources (Atkinson et al., 2001; Crowley-Henry, 2009; Mason, 2002). In the last couple of decades, ethnography enjoys the addition of visual data that have a complementary, yet distinctive, role within studies that focus on consumer and ethnic cultures (Pink, 2001). Other, quite peripheral, but also popular data collection techniques in the ethnographic tradition are the production and analysis of journals/diaries, tape recordings and even the study of material artefacts found in the examined location or context (Spradley, 1980).

Like any other approach to research, ethnography has some limitations. While it offers the opportunity for studying culture and human action from the inside, it is up to the researcher to decide how much to engage with the studied context. It is precisely there that the danger lies, as one common mistake is the excessive personal engagement of the researcher that often leads to subjective findings and conclusions (Fielding, 2008). Atkinson (1990) and Clifford (1986: 6) (both cited in Moores, 1993) referred to the ethnographer’s subjectivity and suggested that ethnographic narratives are ‘partial truths’, as, most likely unintentionally, ethnographers capture in their reporting some of their imagination of the studied culture or population. Furthermore, the issue of time can work in favour or against the ethnographer; the luxury of time and resources can result in a well-rounded study, whereas lack of one or another can bring an abrupt ending to the research.

2.2 The ethnographic turn in media studies

Media studies are one of the scholarly fields that have integrated ethnography, and media scholars have been concerned with the value and importance of ethnography in media research (e.g., Drotner, 1993, 1994). The precursor of the ethnographic turn in media studies was the cultural effects theory, as it stressed the role of culture in how audiences make sense of reality/the world and media messages too (Glover, 1984). One could position the starting point of ethnography in media studies in the 1980s and as soon as prominent debates over media
consumption, media power and media effects started to develop a nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural positioning of media text.

The use of ethnography in media studies signalled the departure from quantitative approaches that tended to categorise and quantify communication activities of all kinds and were dominant in the US tradition of media and communication studies in particular (Horst, Hjorth and Tacchi, 2012: 86). The central position of media ethnography is that audiences are active meaning producers who engage in various ‘readings’ of media texts, with reading being influenced by the social experiences and the range of cultural knowledge that audiences access. The ethnographic approach challenges the argument that the media is a powerful tool that triggers one-way transmission of messages and has direct effects on audiences. On the contrary, it espouses that text is ‘polysemic’ (Fiske, 1987) and that it is for the researcher to discover how audiences produce meaning out of media consumption.

Scholars celebrated the ethnographic turn in media studies when the New Audience Research started to flourish in the late 1980s (see Corner, 1991). The ethnographic-in-orientation New Audience Research initially concentrated on the study of romance reading, television viewing, and how we make sense of the news, and it invited audiences to present their views and experiences through qualitative research, such as open interviews and participant observation (e.g., Ang, 1985; Drotner, 1989; Fiske, 1987, 1990; Morley, 1980; Radway, 1984[1987]; Seiter et al., 1989). Morley’s study of the television magazine Nationwide (1980) was one of the first ethnographic studies of the media audience. Morley’s study collected data through 29 group interviews, with each group being shown a Nationwide programme and then discussing it for 30 minutes. Morley argued that making television text meaningful is more complex than what it is suggested in Hall’s encoding/decoding model, and he found that groups from the same class engaged in different text readings and produced dissimilar meanings. Further, Ien Ang’s (1985) seminal study of watching Dallas was one of the first examples of media ethnographic work that departed from traditional representations of femininity and women’s consumption of popular culture (for more examples, read Drotner, 1989; Fiske, 1990; Radway, 1984[1987]). Ang invited readers of the Dutch women's magazine Viva to write to her about Dallas and their viewing experiences. Ang received 42 letters – mostly from women – and through these letters, she aimed to make sense of the sort of pleasure that watching Dallas was offering to Dutch viewers. Ang used this evidence to inform the debate about the ‘cultural imperialism’ of American television and to disclose individual perspectives on the value of popular culture.
In the early 1990s, media scholars started systematically to employ the epistemological and methodological foundations of ethnography so as to overturn one-dimensional perceptions of the media-audience relationship (e.g., Gillespie, 1995; Gray, 1992; Lull, 1990; Moores, 1993; Morley, 1992; Silverstone, 1990; Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992). Thus, an increasing volume of qualitative media research emerged that relied on the epistemological foundations of ethnography and developed the firm belief that, to make sense of media significance and any existent media effects, one needs to develop an understanding of the meaning construction that audiences engage in during media consumption and to take social context into account. Such an approach prioritised the study of cultures or cultural backgrounds that are marginalised, assigning to media research a rather political or critical character. Also, it prioritised interactive research methods, and it drew on ‘a variety of classical anthropological and ethnological methods of investigation: participant observation, informal talks and in-depth or life course interviews, diaries kept by the informants as well as self-reports kept by the researcher’ (Drotner, 1994: 97). Over the last couple of decades, media ethnography has taken a few different directions. Those adopting a cultural studies approach analyse the contexts of production of cultural texts and scripts, while those interested in design conduct an ethnographic study of media users that will offer conclusions and suggestions about design. Further, those interested in game and performance studies employ ethnography to develop an understanding of the virtual and social words created in or mediated by digital media (Horst, Hjorth and Tacchi, 2012: 87).

More recently, the technological developments and the emergence of digital media have rendered this division between text and audience invalid, as they have enabled a two-way interaction between the medium and the audience, or better yet, the user. In fact, we could argue that it is now more than ever that the user is in a leadership position, able to reinvent the medium’s usability to suit their everyday needs. Further, recent technological advancements have largely shifted the interest of media ethnographers from the traditional media use to the exploration of how users interpret, appropriate and move around the digital mediascape. This has given rise to digital ethnography, which offers media researchers new opportunities while posing new methodological questions and challenges (e.g., Ardevol, 2012; Beaulieu, 2004; Boellstorff, 2008; Boellstorff et al., 2012; Burrell, 2009; Hine, 2000, 2008; Kozinets, 2010). More specifically, digital ethnography suggests ‘an opportunity for making a form of ethnographic enquiry suited to the Internet’ and embraces ‘ethnography as a textual practice and as a lived craft’, thus destabilising ‘the ethnographic reliance on sustained presence in a
found field site’ (Hine, 2000: 43). In their analysis of social media ethnography, Postill and Pink (2012) emphasise the importance of researching ‘digital sociality’ and processes of movement, and they draw their attention to digital practices such as interaction, networking, compilation, sharing, tagging and openness that are inherent to a ‘messy web’. Thus, they highlight the need for ethnographers to shift from the traditional ‘pursuit of ethnographic holism’ (Hine, 2000:48) and from the study of ‘community’ to the study of ‘digital socialities’, to ethnographic places that traverse online/offline contexts and are collaborative, participatory, open and public (Postill and Pink, 2012). Regarding data collection methods in digital ethnography, the main question has been whether old methods should migrate and adjust to a digital environment or whether there is indeed the possibility of creating new methods and adopting a flexible approach to methodology. On the one hand, the use of synchronous and asynchronous data collection methods and the lack of physical proximity grant the digital ethnographer with more honest responses concerning sensitive issues (Walsh, 2012). On the other hand, the researcher is not physically present in the field, the observation takes place in a covert way (larking), in an already distant and hard to define environment, while ethical issues in digital ethnography have proved to be quite thorny, mainly due to identity multiplicity and anonymity online (Tsatsou, 2014).¹

On the whole, the ethnographic turn in media studies has established the epistemological and methodological principles that enable the study of the media-audience relationship at the local or context-specific level. However, critics have questioned whether this approach is genuine ethnography and whether it differs from the media effects tradition (Curran, 1990; Lull, 1988). Murphy (1999) has argued that the political and epistemological debates regarding the role and position of the ethnographer in the actual ethnographic research have limited rather than promoted the development of ethnographic media studies. Others stress the importance of repositioning ethnography in media studies, applying it as a fieldwork-based, long-term practice of data collection and analysis that will allow for solid knowledge about media practices and user or audience engagement with the media (La Pastina, 2005; Murphy and Kredy 2003). Finally, some others have noted the longstanding problem of media ethnographic studies neglecting the study of media institutions and the political economy of the media (Horst, Hjorth and Tacchi, 2012).
3. Migration and migrants’ digital inclusion

3.1 Migration concepts and theories

Migration is ‘the temporary or permanent move of individuals or groups of people from one geographic location to another for various reasons ranging from better employment possibilities to persecution’ (Hangen-Zanker, 2008: 4). Castles, De Haas and Miller (2014) view migration as a protracted process which characterises not so much an individual action but mostly a collective one. Heavily dependent on socioeconomic and political factors, migration results in multiple changes for both the hosting as well as the sending country (Castles, De Haas and Miller, 2014). While the first attempt to explain the causes, motives and traits of migration – especially internal migration – was made by Ravenstein’s ‘laws of migration’ (1885, 1889), the complexity of the phenomenon has led to the development of various approaches over the years (Tomanek, 2011).

One can identify two main theoretical paradigms on migration. The first is the neoclassical economics approach, in which both macroeconomic and microeconomic models have made a strong presence. On the one hand, macroeconomic models suggest that it is because of the discrepancies between wages that people decide to abandon their country in search of a better future. On the other hand, microeconomic models attribute rational agency to the migrant and present the decision of migration as personal and one taken logically after the potential migrant has calculated all available options so as to benefit the most (Castles, De Haas and Miller, 2014; Hagen-Zanker, 2008).

One of the most popular models in the neoclassical microeconomic analysis is the ‘push-pull’ model that dominated the migration scholarship in the middle of the 20th century and until the 1960s. The push-pull model relies on factors, such as utility maximisation, rational choice, factor-price disparities between regions and countries, and labour mobility, to explain migration (Righard, 2012: 13). For instance, Lee’s push–pull theory (1966) suggested that people decide to migrate due to some negative factors that exist in their home country (and push them away) to enjoy some benefits that the receiving country has to offer (and pull them close to it). Nevertheless, it has been criticised as overly descriptive, while it is not believed to form a theory per se but mostly a categorisation of the factors that can affect migration (Hagen-Zanker, 2008: 9).

The neoclassical tradition has been criticised as suffering from determinism, functionalism and a-historicism (Righard, 2012: 14). Specifically, critics have considered it to be overly
simplistic, as it takes as a pre-requisite that potential migrants have total access to information concerning the labour market conditions of the country to which they wish to move. In addition, critics stress that it is mostly middle-class individuals who manage to migrate and not lower social class people who are in need of a better salary, while other significant parameters that affect migration such as the state’s migration policy must be considered more seriously (Castles, De Haas and Miller, 2014; De Haas, 2014; Massey et al., 1993; Sykas, 2008).

Critics of the neoclassical tradition created room for the development of a series of different theoretical approaches to migration in the 1970s and 1980s, such as the Marxist political economy, historical developmentalism and the systems theory (Righard, 2012: 14). The proliferation of theories and models on the phenomenon of migration gave shape to the second main theoretical paradigm on migration: the historical–structural approach. This approach emerged in the 1970s as a sheer contrast to the neoclassical tradition and comprised a compilation of theories and models (e.g., dual and segmented labour markets, dependency theory, and world systems theory), mostly informed by the Marxist interpretation of capitalism and the structuring of the world economy. According to this approach, migration arises from the unequal distribution of socio-political and economic power between countries that ultimately creates deep inequalities. In this respect, people are not believed to be active agents who have control over their decisions; on the contrary, the historical-structural approach suggests that migration covers the need for cheap labour hands through a process that can have disastrous effects for the country sending migrants, such as brain drain (Castles, De Haas and Miller, 2014; Castles and Miller, 2009; Kurekova, 2011). Wallerstein’s (1974) world systems theory links capitalist development and globalisation to people’s migration and argues that migration is the result of dependencies being created from some countries to others. Thus, he classifies countries according to their positioning within the global market economy: the dominant capitalist powers (North America, Europe, Japan, Australia and New Zealand) constitute the ‘core’, upon which the poor countries in the ‘periphery’ are entirely dependent through asymmetric ties of trade, capital penetration and migration.

The historical-structural theory has not escaped criticism too. While the neoclassical approach was criticised for giving too much power to the individual, the historical-structural one has been criticised for removing it (De Haas, 2014). This is so, as it regards migrants as ‘little more than passive pawns in the play of great powers and world processes presided over by the logic of capital accumulation’ (Arango, 2004: 27). At the same time, due to its sweeping historical determinism, this approach is considered quite inadequate to explain ‘real-life’ traits and facets.
of international migration (Righard, 2012: 19), as well as rather unable to analyse today’s complex contemporary migration processes (Chatty, 2010: 12).

While more theoretical approaches to migration than the two discussed above have been formulated over the last few decades (e.g., the networks approach, the new economics of migration), there is ‘no single theory that captures the full complexity of migration, and nor will there ever be’ (Righard, 2012: 24). None of the existing theoretical models seems to provide the sort of overarching theoretical framework that will satisfy the migration scholarly community, and a universal migration theory appears unlikely because migration is too complex and diverse as a phenomenon (Castles and Miller, 2009; Salt, 1987). At the same time, some have suggested that the field remains under-theorised (De Haas, 2014) or weakly theorised (Arango, 2004).

This is not to say that pessimism and lack of scholarly innovation prevail in migration studies. On the contrary, as Righard (2012: 24-25) has eloquently explained, contemporary migration studies are marked by two trends: first, the attempt to reinscribe migration within the wider phenomena of social change and social transformation so that it is not studied in isolation of the societal changes taking place on a number of fronts (e.g., cultural, political, social, technological); second, a ‘cultural turn’ in the epistemological foundations of migration studies that has led scholars to look more into the migration experience than the cause of migration, and thus to turn to qualitative rather than quantitative research. Linked to both these trends is the increasing emphasis on migration as a transnational process, with analyses of transnationalism being quite prominent in the field.

Unquestionably, these recent trends in migration studies have informed the study of migration and ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies). The role of technological development in the experience of migration and the transnational nature of migration in the era of online, instant and global communication are currently at the core of the study of migration and ICTs and largely drive the research of associated phenomena, such as that of migrants’ digital inclusion.

3.2 Studying migrants’ digital inclusion

Over the last couple of decades, media research has been concerned with the role of digital media in migration and migrants’ digital inclusion. Media scholars have produced evidence of the multiple ways in which ICTs can have a positive impact on migrants’ everyday lives (e.g., Georgiou, 2006; Hiller and Franz, 2004; Karim, 2003; Komito, 2011; Leung, 2011). Media
researchers have suggested that the Internet creates spaces where diasporic identities and narratives can be expressed and strengthened (e.g., Georgiou, 2006; Hiller and Franz, 2004; Kissau and Hunger, 2010; Komito, 2011). Mitra (2005). Some others (e.g., Skop and Adams, 2009) have explored the development and evolution of migrant or diasporic communities in cybernetic space, while Poster (1988) quite early on talked about ‘virtual ethnicity’. More specifically, research has examined the role of satellite technology and has acknowledged that the use of satellite television by newly arrived migrants is perhaps the main medium they rely on to receive daily news feeds from their country of origin (Alonzo and Oiarzabal, 2010). Drawing from the pool of newer technologies, the use of Skype is an example of how diasporic communities can maintain an intimate daily relationship with the homeland (Komito and Bates, 2011). Today, the growing use of social media platforms plays a major role in the development of transnational communication and the political mobilisation of migrants (Nyamnjoh, 2013). Research (Komito, 2011) has found that, through voice, video, text and images, social media enhance affinity and shared experience among migrants and support their relations and contacts outside the host country. Thus, it has been argued that social media contribute to bonding capital, slowing down the migrant’s integration in the host society and encouraging the continual movement from one society to another (Komito, 2011).

However, the existing research has not fully addressed migrants’ use of technology in the pre-migration period (Mattelart, 2010). Technology is present before the migrant departs from the homeland and while planning the migration journey. Those preparing their move to a different country increasingly make use of a combination of offline and online technologies for information and educational purposes, such as learning the language and traditions of the host country, as well as searching for a job and making housing applications in the host country. Hiller and Franz (2004) identified three stages in the migration journey – ‘pre-migrant’, ‘post-migrant’ and ‘settled migrant’. However, we argue that there should be a fourth stage situated between the pre-migrant and post-migrant experience that reflects the transitional phase all migrants go through to a greater or lesser degree. This limbo period varies from the other three mainly because it does not involve a static situation. On the contrary, it is characterised by energetic movement during which the migrant faces many different experiences that undoubtedly affect their digital communication and other needs. While journalistic reports have evaluated the presence and role of digital technologies in this transitional phase, in the light of the continuous refugee 'crisis', researchers have recently begun to look - at least in the European
context (e.g., Gillespie et al., 2016) - into the migrant's experience with digital technologies when moving to new physical and life settings.

In more detail, journalistic reports have reported on the importance of being digitally connected for refugees and displaced people who find themselves living in shelters designed for emergency use and braving inhospitable environments, high temperatures, floods and little or no means of communication with the outside world (BBC, 2013). Reports have concluded that displaced persons rely on ICTs and social media for a variety of reasons (WIRED, 2015), such as finding smuggling information via Facebook or simply sending a selfie to relatives back home as a sign of survival. Moreover, numerous digital applications have been designed by both citizen groups and governments to facilitate migrants’ journey and settlement (QUARTZ, 2016). In places where refugee camps have existed for long, such as the Dadaab camp in Kenya, the benefits of being ‘wired’ have been comprehended, and WIFI has been granted (USAID, 2014). On the contrary, in more temporary and recent settlements, such as the ‘jungle’ camp in Calais, providing Internet connection was not the government’s priority.ii

This phase of life transition and physical travel is precisely the period on which existing research on migrants’ digital inclusion omits to shed light. Research is yet to make sense of migrants’ engagement with digital technologies throughout the physical movement involved in their entire migration experience and the implications not only for their connectivity but also for other aspects of their digital inclusion.

4. ‘Travelling with the traveller’: an ethnographic framework for the study of migrants’ digital inclusion

In this paper, we propose a ‘travelling with the traveller’ ethnographic framework for the study of migrants’ digital inclusion during their travel to new physical- and life-settings. The proposed framework adopts the argument that ethnography is a fieldwork-based, long-term practice of data collection that can offer solid knowledge about media practices and user or audience engagement with the media (La Pastina, 2005; Murphy and Kredy 2003), while it adapts this argument to the study of migrants’ engagement with digital media.
4.1 Why ‘travelling with the traveller’?

To support our proposition, we first need to offer some reflective remarks on the concept of ‘travel’. Travel could be temporary or long-term, joyful or distressing, planned or unexpected, voluntary or forced, collective or individual. In its most popular form, travel relates to a pleasant escape, a getaway from one’s everyday environment, the entering in a new state of mind, perhaps a more relaxed one that carries the minimum of the usual daily routine. However, if we trace its meaning back to mythology and Omeros’ Odyssey, we deal with an entirely different meaning of the word, as travel is synonymous to a challenge, a continuous struggle for the hero who endures the physical and mental barriers in his effort to reach his destination: Home. Speaking of the travel of a displaced person, our mind quickly jumps to the category of travel which is synonymous to a challenge and which often involves a fearful route away from home for the discovery of a land that could become the new home.

We currently live in an era that is marked by one of the largest migration waves in history since the Second World War (UNHCR, 2015). Socioeconomic and geopolitical turbulence makes masses of people from various backgrounds and regions around the globe experience a life journey that often happens against their will and changes their lives forever. The migrant’s travel is usually reported in extensive humanitarian reports, (sentimental) documentaries, news bulletins or personal life stories told by refugees and migrants themselves, but it is hardly captured in scholarly ethnographic work in the field. Thus, the questions this paper aims to answer are: why we need ethnography to research a migrant’s travel and why we, researchers, need to become migrants’ co-travellers to conduct such ethnographic research.

Let us explain our proposition by reflecting on the example of forced migration. In forced migration, a change in geographical location and place of residence occurs, most often accompanied by the sudden loss of material possessions, an uprooting that leads from one spot of the map to another. Travel in the migration context involves crossing the borders, something which for forced migrants signifies not only a physical transition, but also a violent displacement of the mentality and well-being and with hardly foreseeable repercussions for their identity. If we portray a familiar picture from the recent wave of forced migrants from Syria, we can see that, in attempting a life-risking escape from the war zone, they commenced a dangerous journey to freedom only to find a new status waiting to be imposed on them on the other side of the border. They were no longer citizens; they were survivors, victims, irregular economic migrants or asylum seekers as war refugees (Tazzioli, 2015). These new terms,
defined by controversial international conventions, were their new identifiers that largely
determined their rights and responsibilities.

However, the phase of life transition and physical travel is precisely the period which existing
research on migrants’ digital inclusion omits to shed light on. This new stage in a migrant’s life
could pave the way for a whole new stream in the research of migrants’ digital inclusion. What
we argue is that the proposed ‘traveller with the traveller’ ethnographic framework could
contribute to such a development. Our proposition is also a timely one. The situation in Europe,
as it is currently unfolding, with most borders closed or tightly monitored, a large number of
migrants who have arrived in Europe find their journey lasting much longer than initially
planned or anticipated. This situation invites researchers to identify how migrants’ digital needs
and patterns of digital media use may be affected by the long and troublesome travel from their
homeland. This is precisely where our proposition for the ‘travelling with the traveller’
ethnography can best apply.

4.2 Principles and techniques in the ‘travelling with the traveller’ framework

The study of migrants’ digital inclusion via the proposed ‘travelling with the traveller’
ethnographic framework involves certain principles and methodological practices.

In terms of principles, it draws some parallels between the notion of travel, the practice of
ethnography and the role of the researcher. Specifically, it approaches ethnography as a
journey, with the ethnographer resembling a person who departs for and plunges into new
experiences. It understands the researcher as the traveller who obtains basic knowledge of the
place and the culture to visit, but mostly for the purpose of serving exploration and discovery.
Another parallel is that between the traveller - who keeps records of the trip via postcards and
souvenirs and captures the experience through a camera - and the researcher - who collects
written, visual and audio artefacts. Along these lines, both the ethnographer and the traveller
observe, with the former following a strategic plan of observation and the latter wandering
around, aiming at survival and (often) integration. In this respect, both the researcher and the
travelling migrant interact with the locals in search of new information and aiming to dive into
the unknown culture even though sometimes they only manage to scratch the surface of it.

From a data collection perspective, covering a journey that promises to be rich in experiences
and diversity of information, it must involve a mixture of methods, each with its usefulness for
the researcher who co-travels with the subject of study, the travelling migrant. For the sake of
brevity, we present here three research techniques for employment in the proposed framework and some associated challenges. We suggest a synthesis of techniques that will enable researchers to travel across as many aspects of reality as possible and thus to gather enough evidence for building a multifaceted projection of the traveller’s life and not just another story about them. The suggested tools can be employed independently of one another, yet here we approach them as if they complement one another.

**Participant Observation:** This has historically been the most popular method of ethnographic study and the ethnographic tradition has recorded a range of possible ways in which the researcher can be placed in fieldwork as an observer. Observing a migrant’s patterns of digital inclusion during the migration travel almost naturally leads to the researcher being a participant. However, it also involves a series of unique challenges. First, there is the issue of access, as reaching refugee or migrant population means that the researcher will access and gain the trust of people who live under a lot of stress, and they may not be friendly or willing to help with the research at all times. The researcher must acknowledge that features such as different ethnicity and the non-migrant status might be a challenge for establishing self as a legitimate co-traveller and an observer at the same time. Gaining access to a human rights organisation or a support group might alleviate some of these difficulties. Second, in being an active participant, the researcher will face the same travel experience as the research subjects and this might involve psychological and logistic implications which can hardly be foreseen before the commencement of the research. Regarding the outputs and recordings of participant observation, fieldwork notes and keeping a diary involve a new level of complexity and additional effort should be made to maintain an organised recording as changing places frequently could result in a great degree of mixed data with varying analytical value.

**Interviews:** Interviewing is the second most common technique traditionally used in ethnographic research. The proposed framework suggests travelling for many hours and days and this can give the researcher plenty of time to select the sample of interviewees as well as the chance to initiate meaningful and natural rapport. Semi-structured interviews and informal talks will be the most broadly used techniques. Resting periods could be used for discussions of more personal and sensitive matters, while (planned) casual conversations during waiting or walking would be ideal for extracting comments on recent events, experiences and so on. Interviews do not have to include only the directly researched population of course. In each place, key persons can be traced and interviewed, if needed, such as members of NGOs, officials but also those who work individually or collectively towards providing migrants with
the necessary for their well-being. The comparative analysis of these actors who often present very contrasting views on the same issue can be an excellent way for the researcher to dig into the complex interrelationships between actors/agents, available digital technologies and services, and the broader milieu/context.

Photography/video: the proposed travelling with the traveller framework also suggests a collection of audio-visual data, which is used less frequently than participant observation and interviewing in ethnographic study. Regardless of the narrative character of ethnography that produces verbal images, there is plenty of journalistic and documentary coverage of the theme of migration. Here we argue that audio-visual data must be collected by the ethnographer co-travelling with migrants. This is so because audio-visual data have a triple function in the proposed framework. First, audio-visual data can depict the changing scenery during travel and thus portray the different traits and dimensions of what ethnographers call ‘context’, which stands at the core of ethnographic research. What is more, the use of technology and its various affordances for the production of photographs and/or videos can interestingly complement the observation and interview data, adding vividness to reporting and allowing further familiarisation with the studied ‘context’, namely with the settings of the travel at the greatest possible level. Third, it is important to remember that the appearance of waves of migrants is usually related to harsh events and is accompanied by a chaotic environment crowded with various actors who operate under stress, anger and in a disorderly manner, and this is where audio-visual material can support the researcher’s narrative against claims of subjectivity or bias. This is even more important in the study of migrants’ use of digital artefacts and resources, as audio-visual footage can provide solid data on complex processes and diverse experiences in the appropriation of digital artefacts among migrants, providing the researcher with data that can undergo various stages of analysis at different times and for addressing different questions.

5. Concluding discussion

This paper has argued for research that sheds light on migrants’ use of digital technologies within the time frame and context of the ‘migration travel’ and while migrants are in transition to a host country, to a place for resettlement. For the conduct of such research, the paper proposes a travelling with the traveller research framework that applies the ethnographic methodology and aims at the researcher becoming an integral part of the migration travel.
The use of this ethnographic framework suggests the departure from a static approach to migrants’ digital inclusion and questions the study of digital inclusion within steady individual, societal and life contexts. Further, it invites researchers to revisit the understanding of digital inclusion as closely related to migrants’ settling into the host country and to examine the role and importance of digital inclusion throughout the migration experience, a significant part of which involves the actual (physical and with symbolic repercussions) process and experience of travel. Methodologically, our proposition invites the use of the travel experience as both the locus and object of ethnographic research and welcomes researchers adopting a more reflective conceptualisation of the role of ‘context’ and ‘culture’ in digital inclusion. In this respect, the various environments and physical locations constitute a multi-layered ‘travel context’ that must be explored and reflectively analysed in relation to patterns of digital media use and their importance. Once the researcher has a broad idea of the existing conditions in which migrants survive, live and move, it becomes easier to focus the study on the practices and reflections that render (digital) communication imperative within constrained locations, such as immigration detention centres, or the random places that migrants cross daily on their way to new borders.

Hence, the proposed ‘travelling with the traveller’ framework can offer genuine insights into the implications of digital inclusion (or the absence of it) for the levels of experiencing, combating or alleviating all sorts of adversities, volatile emotions, unanticipated problems and moments of uncertainty or crisis that home country leavers so often encounter when on the move from homeland to another land, from one life setting to another. Even beyond the study of migrants’ digital inclusion, it should not come as a surprise if a researcher decides to become a traveller, since the nature of ethnography does not prohibit it in any way. However, this might sound a bit unruly because it is common for ethnographers to focus on one particular ‘culture’ or ‘context’ during scientific exploration. It is standard for the ethnographer to visit places or cultures and reside there for an extended period until they have gathered all necessary data. This, however, does not allow the researcher to capture what we witness being a relocation of people and cultures and, on a larger scale, the revisiting of the legitimacy and power of the nation-state.

Therefore, by following the steps and stops of populations that are mobile (not always by choice), the researcher can reach a better understanding of the situation under research and witness the interconnection between behaviours and the surrounding environments so as to make sense of relations of causality or interdependency that can explain trends and nuances of
digital inclusion and other phenomena. Another advantage of the travelling with the traveller ethnographic framework is that the researcher can develop relationships of trust with the participant since the researcher and participants will experience shared adventures. Such feelings of sharing and increasing trust can initiate lively discussions between the researcher and participants; discussions that will not be limited to the given time of study but will bring to light individual and collective memories of the past, as well as aspirations for the future. Consequently, trust in combination with the continuous presence of the researcher will allow recordings of collective and individual memory to be made in real time. The fact that participants will not have the time to analyse and rationalise their experiences means that the researcher will be in a position to grasp a unique set of the participant’s thoughts and emotions while they are still vivid, unprocessed and thus original. In addition, being in the same location and sharing experiences during the journey will help the researcher compare the similarities and differences between a real event and how people narrate it. This will give the researcher the opportunity to reflect on what they recorded as and thought of an event in comparison to the participant, a process that can bring to light possible stereotypes or very different points of view.

Nevertheless, we understand that the principles and techniques of the proposed ‘travelling with the traveller’ framework must be employed and tested in empirical research. Specific cases or waves of migration could be deployed in order the empirical operationalisation of the proposed framework to be pursued, with the aim being to reach concrete conclusions about the insights and knowledge that the proposed framework can offer to those researching migrants’ digital inclusion. From a longer-term perspective, the possibility of deploying the proposed framework in studies that examine other migration-related phenomena than migrants’ digital inclusion should be investigated. The epistemological and methodological value of this framework for migration studies, more broadly, is something that researchers should begin to elaborate and reflect on.

References


**Notes**

1 Researchers have made various propositions to overcome these challenges. For instance, Sade-Beck (2004, cited in Tsatsou, 2014) proposes ‘rich ethnography’ that combines online observations, offline in-person interviews and content analysis of supplementary online and offline documents, databases and other materials.

2 However, according to what a member of a UK-based solidarity group stated in a private conversation with the authors, this does not mean that immigrants may be isolated from the rest of the world, as they appear ‘well-connected on their own’.