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# Editorial: Migration studies and the digital: datafication, implications and methodological approaches

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## Editorial on the Research Topic

[Migration studies and the digital: datafication, implications and methodological approaches](#)

Migration is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that shapes societies and individuals around the world. As the digital era unfolds, the field of Migration Studies has witnessed a significant shift in focus, with more scholars increasingly mobilizing digital archival sources and employing Digital Humanities methodologies for their analysis (Pöttschke and Rinken, 2022). This Research Topic brings together a collection of contributions that explore new directions within the evolving field of Digital Migration Studies, offering an overview of innovative approaches and results that highlight the richness and potential of the intersection between Migration Studies and the digital realm.

Advancements in the field of digital humanities have paved the way for the development of analytical tools that enable researchers to trace migration patterns with unprecedented depth and accuracy. These tools facilitate a wide range of data-driven techniques, including word vector models, discourse-driven topic modeling, place name extraction, visualization techniques (e.g., “Flow toward Europe”), automated text recognition of handwritten sources, network analysis, and classifiers for genre detection (Clavadetscher et al., 2022). These methodological advancements empower scholars to delve into migration studies with a fresher perspective, uncovering intricate patterns, and shedding light on the forces and dynamics that shape human movement.

The use of digital datasets and technologies for example brings forth new dimensions to the field of Migration Studies, unveiling a multitude of research directions. One of the key advantages offered by digital collections is the ability to seamlessly integrate macro and micro perspectives. Distant reading techniques, for instance, enable researchers to map and visualize larger migration patterns, facilitating the identification of continuities and changes over extended periods. By merging the macro and micro lenses, comprehensive overviews of demographic migration patterns can be constructed, while simultaneously revealing unexpected connections between departure and arrival locations. Digitized data allows for the assessment of both grand historical forces and the intricate pathways of individual lives, painting a holistic picture of migration experiences (see Venken and Sauer in this collection and their discussion of complex migration trajectories).

Furthermore, the utilization of digital and digitized collections enables scholars to uncover the lived experiences of immigrants (Al Kalak, 2022; see Viola in this collection and her analysis of return migration as a cognitive experience). Through the mapping and recording of narratives, stories, and voices of underrepresented individuals, digital methodologies provide a platform to give life to previously marginalized perspectives. Additionally, digital technologies play a crucial role in the study of public media as carriers of meaning, particularly in relation to migrants. Mass migration and mass media have long been intertwined, shaping the expectations of migrants and constructing their roles within host societies. Ethnic media, including newspapers and social media networks, offer unique insights into the lived experiences of migration, reflecting the realities and challenges faced by immigrant communities (see Winarnita, 2019; Dedecek Gertz, Viola). Just like immigrant newspapers at the turn of the twentieth century, digital-born social media networks and internet connectivity play a significant role in maintaining connections among diaspora groups across borders, facilitating communication networks and aiding migrants in their journeys and settlement processes (see Dedecek Gertz in this collection and her analysis of migrants' digital traces and Viola in this collection on how diasporic newspapers can unlock new perspectives on migration studies). These networks become particularly crucial during moments of transition and crisis, such as the death of a family member (see Sánchez-Querubín in this collection and her conceptual analysis of “technological haunting” as a concept in migration and transnational death studies).

While the integration of digital heritage collections and analytical methodologies presents exciting possibilities, this Research Topic also addresses the challenges inherent in their usage within the study of migration experiences and patterns. One such challenge lies in the diversity of data, as researchers must navigate the connections between databases, media sources, stories, and multimedia of different origins and metadata structures (see Arthur and Smith in this collection and their discussion of the tensions between technological advances and methodological shifts in migration research). Meaningfully tracing the life trajectories of migrants necessitates bridging archival collections that often reflect the needs and power structures of nation-states, treating migrants as exceptions rather than central figures. Governments, both in countries of origin and destination, often create and utilize data structures to monitor and govern migration, making it a digital challenge to connect administrative waypoints in migrant journeys (see Faassen and Hoekstra in this collection and their analysis of the dispersed and fragmented nature of migration heritage involving at least two countries).

In addition, the categorization of migrants introduces complexities and challenges in data collection and analysis. The layers of identity and the positive or negative connotations associated with terms such as migrants, fugitives, asylum seekers, aliens, foreigners, radicals, or terrorists can influence the creation of digital collections and the institutional attempts to create rubrics. These categories shape our understanding of migration experiences and impact the representation and interpretation of data (see Viola in this collection and her analysis of how returned migrants were linguistically framed in the press).

Furthermore, the silences within the cultural archive pose significant challenges. Inequality of archival representation and knowledge production is a persistent issue, as certain migrant groups, such as female immigrants or intersecting marginalized identities, remain underrepresented. Digital methodologies hold the potential to address these gaps, but doing so requires a constant application of source criticism and methodological scrutiny to ensure accurate and inclusive representation (see Arthur and Smith; Faassen and Hoekstra). However, it is essential to navigate the ethical questions surrounding information gathering, particularly when vulnerable groups are involved, to uphold the principles of informed consent, privacy, and the responsible use of data (see Dedecek Gertz in this collection and her discussion of the ethical issues surrounding digital migration research).

But digital scholarship also opens opportunities to revisit old Research Topics in historical migration studies -such as return migration -from new angles and perspectives. Beyond socio-economic indicators, migration statistics, or post factum interviews, newly rediscovered digitized sources, for example immigrant newspapers, allow scholars to access the inner voice of migrants and explore unanswered questions about the mass migratory movements of the past century. Digital approaches can indeed open access to a more authentic voice of the migratory experience, enabling researchers to understand it as a profoundly changing psychological experience and a crisis of identity (see Viola in this collection and her analysis of historical return migration as a complex, discursive process).

The contributions to this Research Topic illuminate the dynamic landscape of Migration Studies in the digital age, offering valuable insights into new research frontiers, analytical methodologies, and the challenges faced by scholars in this emerging field. By exploring digital archival sources and employing Digital Humanities approaches, the authors of this collection contribute to a deeper understanding of migration, fostering interdisciplinary dialogue, and encouraging critical reflections on the implications and applications of the digital in the study of human mobility.

Ultimately, the Research Topic “*Migration studies and the digital*” propels the field of Migration Studies forward.

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LV: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. MV: Writing – review & editing. JV: Writing – original draft.

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