Living in the Limits: Migration and Information Practices of Undocumented Latino Migrants

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Abstract. Information practices, whether mediated by technologies or not, have critical roles on the experience leading up to and resulting from migration. This paper analyzes the relationships between information practices (information seeking, use, and sharing [1]) and Latino migration in and towards the US. The paper is based on findings from two convergent studies of Latin American migrants in the US [2]-[3]. The two studies are based on the qualitative collection of stories by undocumented Latino migrants in different contexts. Based on our findings, we contend that migration is not a process that follows a linear progression of stages, as some scholars indicate, and that information practices can not only help expand migrants' perceptions of their place of origin and of destination, but they also help them reaffirm their notions of wellbeing, or what a good life means to them. In addition, we show that information and communication technologies (ICT) are affording migrant lives a stronger sense of 'in-betweenness', generating new experiences of nationhood, sense of belonging and citizenship, as well as forming new national-transnational identities. Methodologically, our convergent studies evidence the power of using stories as a research method to gain deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics and experiences of migration, a central phenomenon of our time.

Keywords: migration, information practice, information behavior, undocumented, Latino, liminality,

1 Introduction

International migration occupies one of the most important places in the media, academic and political agendas since last decade, with growing emphasis over the last five years, in which we have witnessed especially salient migration crises in the US and in Europe. The US has seen growing waves of undocumented migrants from Mexico, Central and South America at the US-Mexico border, including a spike of unaccompanied minors from Central America, seeking a new life in the US; immigration policy is vastly inadequate to deal with the problem, and congress inaction has left the country with no viable immigration reform in sight.

According to the Pew Research Center (PRC) in 2014 there were 11.3 million unauthorized immigrants in the United States, about 3.5% of the nation's population. The number of unauthorized immigrants had peaked in 2007 at 12.2 million (4% of

the U.S. population, and 5.1% of the U.S. labor force). The majority of unauthorized immigrants come from Latin America and the Caribbean, with **Mexi**cans making up about half of the total (49%). Mexico is followed by El Salvador (6.1% in 2012); Guatemala (4.7%); India (4.0%); Honduras (3.1%); China (2.7%); \ Philippines (1.8%); Korea (1.6%), \ Dominican Republic (1.5%) and Colombia (1.5%). In 2014, California, Texas, Florida, New York, New Jersey and Illinois were home to about 60% of unauthorized immigrants in the US.

Migration has also given rise to new types of social mobilization, as when migrants in the US demonstrate for their rights and for comprehensive immigration reform, or when people protest against international migrants, as we saw among Trump supporters in the US, or in the anti-immigration protests in European countries. Such anti-immigrant sentiments fueled political results such as "Brexit", the exit of the UK from the European Union early in 2016; according to The Economist, anger at immigration as well as globalization and liberalism were considered the most important factors that moved voters to decide [4]

While numerous scholars have studied communication and information practices of migrants for a good overview of recent research see [6], very few have focused on the "excluded" end of Nail's [5] continuum: asylum seekers, migrant workers, *sans papiers* (French for "without papers") and irregular, unauthorized, or undocumented migrants, among others, all of whom live at the margins of political life and in the extreme marginalization and exclusion from mainstream society. The communication and information practices of these extremely marginalized and excluded groups of migrants have received little attention by the studies handle the interactions among migration, communication and information. Notable exceptions include the studies of [10] [11], and [3], [12]–[13].

The global dimension of migrations, the rising numbers of both immigrants and countries affected by migration, and the changes in technologies, especially ICT, called for a reexamination of migration and for an incorporation of new dimensions and academic approaches[14]. For these reasons our comparative study seeks to better understand the communication and information practices, whether mediated or not by information and communication technologies, of undocumented immigrants from Central and Latin America, and how these practices are impacting their migrations trajectories and cycles. In order to accomplish these goals, we first present the methodological common ground that supports our studies, offering information about their singularities as well. Then we present common and particular findings of our studies and finally we discuss our findings with the aim of documenting how family and friends are critical to the experience and information practices of migrants, particularly as they live in a state of "in-betweenness" that relies ever so strongly on information to strengthen the economic, social and cultural capital of migrants.

2   Migration, communication and information: Literature review and conceptual stances

The field of studies analyzing information and immigration relationships shows very different theoretic and methodological approaches, where case studies are prevalent. Scholars in communications, linguistics, anthropology, sociology and, more recently, information sciences and other integrated and cross-disciplinary programs have contributed widely to this field. Many of the communication studies have a research tradition coming from media studies, emphasizing the effects of media discourses and the roles and uses of media among immigrants. Numerous cultural studies, which have a significant trajectory analyzing issues related to race, gender and power, have made important contributions on issues related to globalization and identities. The studies analyzing the relationships among information, communication, migration and ICT could be organized around 4 overlapping topics: The first one show the conditions and factors that influence perceptions, access and uses of ICT, emphasizing studies on digital divide and comparative studies between native and non-native groups[15]-[16]-[17]-[18].They sustain the significant influence of ICT access and skills on employment, educational opportunities and civic engagement, and the advantages/disadvantages between immigrants and natives of the US. These studies also point out that ICT skills are crucial to success in the workplace and at school, and they play a vital role in civic and political engagement.

The second topic deal with the processes of embeddedness of media and ICT in daily life, emphasizing relationships and networks in local and transnational spaces [19]-[20]-[21]; [22]; [23]; [24] . This group of studies explores the use of ICT as a contextualizing tool for societal integration and inclusion amongst migrant populations, either in conjunction with ICT use for homeland connection, or as a distinct phenomenon.

The third topic focuses on the uses and appropriation of ICT and immigrants' information behavior [25]-[26]-[27]-[28]; [29]; [30] ; This studies portray multiple, simultaneous, and complementary, practices and uses of different forms of information and communication, which implicates different social spaces, times, and technologies (from interpersonal communication to the use of sophisticated information technologies and platforms).

The last topic emphasizes the relationships between ICT and empowerment, social capital and civic engagement[31]-[18]-[32]-[33]-[34] ; [35]; [8]). The studies show that both alternative media (e.g. radio and cartoons), and emerging Internet-based technologies, including social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter or YouTube), have played significant roles in facilitating immigrants' navigation of and integration into society. However ICT have also enabled social and political participation of immigrants in different countries, helping them to become actors of the co-constructions of their new communities and cultures[1].

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[1] Fortunati, Pertierra, & Vincent suggest the concept of co-construction, which assumes that each society is a dynamic system which meets and maybe clashes with other cultures, but in so doing enriches itself and consequently changes (Fortunati et al., 2012).

These topics provide significant evidence on how important information and communication are in different life aspects of migrants and migration. However we underline the following contributions of these studies: 1) they brought a valuable set of theories and concepts that challenge and provide analytical tools for further research, including different approaches to globalization(s) and their links with both the roles of imagination[36], as well as the notions of information environment as well as in-betweenness (as a concept related to space; time and perceptions/representations); 2) they show the impact or potential impact of ICT in different activities of migrants (both as individuals as well as collectively) such as: the ways they imagine and represent reality; inform and get informed; communicate; build and share knowledge; create, strengthen and weaken social networks; forge and express identities and senses of belonging; and 3) they portray multiple, simultaneous, and in several ways complementary, practices and uses of different forms of information and communication, which implicates different social spaces, times, and technologies [37].

Particularly, for our comparative endeavor we follow Savolainen [1] and use the constructivist notion of "information practices," which allows for a more nuanced, less reductionist understanding than the behavioristic label given to information seeking, use and sharing. Additionally, we build on Caidi and colleagues idea of the overlapping settlement stages that helps situate the information and communication practices of migrants[6]; as well as the varying information practices of undocumented migrants that change between *places of departure, places of transition and places of destination*, where there are constant negotiations between "here" and "there" and information practices that help to broaden the world view of migrants [23].

3 Research Methods: two convergent studies that harness the power of stories

Within social sciences there is a resurgence of interest in narrative as social act and form of explanation, on storytelling as a social process, on life histories and accounts as social objects for research, and on the narrative construction of identity [38]. This author argues the contemporary narrative turn is part of a renewed emphasis on human agency, on context and the embeddedness of human experience, as well as the importance of language to the negotiation of meanings and the construction of identity in everyday life. However, from his perspective, stories are fundamentally transactional (we prefer to call them interactional), and this, in addition to their organizing operations, accounts for their discursive power. "The storytelling process, as a social transaction, engages people in communicative relationship. Through identification and "co-creation" of a story, the storyteller and reader/listener create a "we" involving some degree of affective bond and a sense of solidarity." [41, p. 19].

The studies that support this paper uses different forms of interviews and observations in order to develop migration stories that also provided us with other data such as demographics, gender issues, migrants networks and legal status. Building stories them offer us, at least, three important contributions to this endeavor: 1) elicit richer and complex understanding of individual experiences, opinions and feelings 2) ad-

dress sensitive topics, and 3) empower participants with multiple and diverse perspectives. Stories, data and analysis also offer the opportunity to create vivid and clearer versions no just open for experts and academics but also more comprehensible for other social sectors, such as, policy makers, activists and social and cultural organizations.

After collecting information and stories both studies use a content analysis method, that includes the following steps: a) transcription of material collected from audio and visual sources; b) unitization, dividing textual material into units for further analysis; c) categorization, in which categories relevant to the research questions were developed and revised through an iterative process of analysis; and d) coding, in which the units were assigned to categories related to research questions (see Nastase, Koeszegi, & Szpakowicz, 2007[39]). Finally, we weaved our own stories, giving visibility and importance to the main trends we found in our data. In the majority of the cases, we returned our versions and analysis to the people that participated in our research, and after that we adjusted our findings and conclusions with their feedback.

Historias de Migración, uses in-depth interviews as a technique designed to produce a vivid pictures of the participant's trajectories of migration, and to establish a human-to-human relation with the participants and the desire to understand rather than to explain [40]. The interviews are also the basis for the development of trajectories (short stories type) that provide both qualitative and quantitative information. For this particular endeavor we selected 28 stories, from more than 100 stories that we have collected with Colombian migrants. The 28 we selected represent migration stories of Colombians going to, or staying in, the United States.

Fotohistorias uses participatory photography and in-person interviews to elicit life experiences with a migrants in order to help surface the richness, diversity and depth of their roots, experiences and aspirations [3], [41]. The participatory photography process involves inviting participants to take pictures, them taking and/or bringing in their own photographs, and holding a conversational interview to talk about the pictures. In 2014-15 we conducted 39 interviews using Fotohistorias participatory photography and interviews in Seattle, WA (15), in Nogales, Mexico (8) and around Cali, Colombia (16). Interviews were transcribed, translated, and coded for emerging themes using qualitative analysis software.

4   Findings: Migration stories, the life "in-between"

In Historias de Migración and Fotohistorias, we find four main emerging themes related to information behaviors of migrants: (1) perceiving social networks of family and friends as the most important spaces and sources of information; (2) acknowledging transience and vulnerability of status; (3) viewing traditional media and interactive ICT portraying the images and models of progress; and (4) experiencing a deepened sense of 'in-betweenness' character of migration. In addition to the emerging themes, we note that the significant role of economic, cultural and information capitals in deciding the forms, destinations and results of migration.

4.1 Trustworthy spaces and sources of information

Our two studies show that close social networks of family and friends are the most important spaces of communication and the sources of information that people used for making decisions to migrate and during their migration trajectories, especially when they were crossing national borders (legally and illegally). For instance, *Historias de Migración*, pointed out that the information and stories of relatives, friends, and loved ones are the primary sources in both processes to decide to migrate and the destinations to take. They are also the main bases to decide and to take the routes and forms of migration. The processes of adaptation and integration of new migrants in their destinations are mediated by their social networks. Issues such as achieving food and housing, finding work or study, or a school for the children, are definitive in the experiences of immigrants. Regular communication with family, friends and relatives in their hometowns are crucial for adaptation, integration and *co-construction*[2] of migrants. The use of ICT, especially mobile phones, text messages (like WhatsApp) and Skype are highlighted in the daily lives of migrants, which set well-defined routines communication and information with their original places.

4.2 Transience and vulnerability

Fotohistorias found that at the border migrants prefer word of mouth information above any other source, in order to negotiate the extreme vulnerability of their transient existence. Word of mouth referrals come from family and friends, from other migrants, and from humanitarian service providers, and they are the preferred source to identify trustworthy guides and help in the border crossing. The information practices of migrants at the border are reminiscent of "life in the round" and other small-world information-poverty behaviors [42], but these behaviors are bound in time and place by the *transience and vulnerability* of the migrants' temporary lives at the border. Their information poverty can be life threatening, as they risk it all to cross the border; but their information poverty as "insiders" is only temporary, for they will soon be somewhere else, no longer at the border, and their friends of today will only be a memory of one of the most difficult moments in their journey of migration.

"You see all the latest news and see people who get a lot of money with simple jobs and sending remittances to their countries of origin, does influence the decision. But half the things they say are far from reality. People do not realize how hard it is to get what you have here, because we work so hard in the US, and many Latino immigrants undervalue their work." Migrant woman, 37 years old.

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[2] Fortunati, Pertierra, & Vincent concept of co-construction assumes that each society is a dynamic system which meets and maybe clashes with other cultures, but in so doing enriches itself and consequently changes [9].

4.3   Images and models of progress

In the two studies, traditional media (press, radio and television) as well as more contemporary and interactive ICT (particularly Facebook, Instagram and Blogs), had a strong impact on the images and models of progress, freedom and wellbeing that migrants had before, during and after their migratory trajectories. Those images, which contrast the countries (origin and destination) poverty, security, equality and democracy, seem to be the main *engines* that stimulate, move and keep migrants looking for a better life. Particularly, *Historias de Migración*, portrays the articulation of national and international migration dynamics, especially when people express the main causes of their migration. In this sense, their stories show a mixture between the search of better living conditions (better jobs, better income, better professional development, and wellbeing) and the effects of the armed political conflict (more security and peacefulness). Local and transnational dynamics are triggered and maintained by building process of social networks, facilitated by ICT, that encourage and make more effective migration experiences of the group of Colombians of this study.

4.4   Deepening 'in-betweenness'

The two studies also confirm that communication and information practices supported by technologies have favored and deepened the 'in-betweenness' character of the whole dynamic of migration, which in words of [43] means that migrants are constantly negotiating cultural forms and identities at the crossroads of the nation-state and global diasporas. Accordingly, *Fotohistorias* show how migrants at the border experience the transience and vulnerability of their life in between "here" and "there". Migrants rarely fit the mold of the progressive stages, and undocumented migrants maybe least of all, given the sustained impermanence brought about by economic, social and political exclusion, and the constant fear of detention and deportation. (Undocumented) migrants tend to live in the in-between space of "moderately transient" to "moderately enduring" existence, where they have to balance their information practices between the careful seekers of information from trusted sources and the generous providers of information to others.

Meanwhile, *Historias de Migration* also show that United States is the preferred destination of transnational migrants from Colombia, but the US is also used as a transit place to go to Canada or some European countries, in their intent to conquest a better life. The communication and information practices through ICT (particularly Facebook, WhatsApp, Skype and Instagram), were considered as emotional and cultural supports that allow migrants to remain "connected" with their families, their neighborhoods and their countries, as well as with the socio-political situation of the nation and cultural traditions and practices of their hometowns, while enriching their daily lives elsewhere in the world. Moreover, ICT were understood as a definitive tool to link space, time, cycles and experiences between places of origin and those places

where the people migrated. In this sense ICT support a *liminal*[3] experience of migration: this is a permanent transit and connection between different worlds.

"I do not feel only Colombian anymore; on the contrary I feel I belong to the world. Three years ago this would haven't been my answer, because I was not even thought of leaving the country." Migrant man, 43 years old.

4.5 Role of economic, cultural and information capitals

Our studies also show that economic, cultural and information *capitals*[4] are decisive for the forms, destinations and results of migration. *Historias de Migración* show that Colombian migrants with higher capitals (middle-high class, professional and bilingual) are looking for settle in other countries or use their migration experience as a springboard to go to another country, mainly North America or Europe. Migrants with lower capitals tend to go to South American countries or they tend to move inside of the country. The younger, more educated and childless, they migrate in search of better education and better working conditions and practice to ensure them a good life, quiet, with good income and facilities to stay and enjoy the levels of development of countries, cities or regions they are staying. Previous access and use of ICT were essential for migrants in order to decide the places to go, the routes to take, the people to ask for supporting. Moreover, access and use to ICT were crucial during their trajectories, especially, to be connected with family and friends, as well as to communicate with national and international organizations that bring them support and protection. Meanwhile *Fotohistorias* show a relation between access and use of information and the integration and settlement of migrants. The information practices of migrants in Seattle reveal a clear progression between using cell phones to place and receive calls, and a growing use of smart phones, tablets and computers as tools for information, communication, and entertainment. The public library is frequently perceived as a gateway to a larger information universe, which complemented with English language lessons and other skills training, help to consolidate the information practices of the migrants as they settle and integrate, though they are rarely truly integrated given the generally irremediable exclusion of their undocumented status. And yet, their information practices help move them away from transience and toward endurance: from careful seekers of information by word of mouth, to savvy users of information from different sources, and to generous providers of information for others[46].

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[3] According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word "liminal" comes from the Latin word limens, meaning literally, "threshold." In anthropology this term was traditionally used to describe ritual stages of transition. More recently, use of the term has broadened to describe political and cultural change as well [44]. Discussion: migration and information practices

[4] We are using Bourdieu and Johnson, for whom capital is an actor's accumulation and uses of different forms of material and symbolic powers [45, p.4].

5   Discussion and Conclusions

Kymlicka [7] reminds us that categories of "immigrant" or "foreigner" are not brute facts, but are socially constructed, and these concepts reflect the forms societies and researchers define the "others". This author also points out that immigration and multiculturalism policies are confronting contemporary nations with a dilemma between solidarity and diversity. However, taking into account that immigrants are contributing with different forms of belonging, civic friendship, reciprocity and solidarity, he suggests the need to develop a form of multiculturalism that enables immigrants to express their culture and identity as modes of participating and contributing to the national societies. Boaventura de Sousa Santos [47] also recalls that modern societies had lived with the contradiction between the principles of emancipation, which continued pointing towards equality and social integration, and the principles of regulation, which went into effect the processes of inequality and exclusion produced by capitalist development. He also sustains that emancipatory politics and the development of new forms of citizenship are confronted within the tensions between equality and difference, that is, the need for redistribution and the demand for recognition.

In a similar vein Agamben [48], sustains that the dichotomy of being inside/outside the law constitutes the "state of exception": the legitimation of sovereign violence that reduces the other to a "bare life" with no political rights. Nonetheless, the work of the undocumented migrants reduced to "bare life" is a central component of the US economy, as they do work that others won't do, for less money, and in more dangerous or precarious conditions. This all helps to keep prices down and profits up. The work of the undocumented migrants "is essential to the functioning of the economy and to the comfort of citizens. The system is also, however, fundamentally unjust. By creating a necessarily subordinate workforce without legal status, we maintain a system of legalized inequality" [49, p.14].

In our studies we focus on Latino migrants from South and Central America and Mexico, most of whom migrate to the US. Nonetheless, some head for Europe, and there is also in-region migration, as with Colombians going to Peru, Chile or Argentina and Central Americans going to Mexico, as well as in-country migration, especially internally displaced people given political and drug violence in Colombia and Honduras. Among these migrants we find there are (1) those who want to leave but can't, (2) those who can't stay and are forced to leave, and (3) those who stay and build a future for themselves and for others at home. At the same time, there are (4) those who long to return but can't, (5) those who can return but won't, and (6) those who are forced to return (deported), even if it is to a place where they no longer have any roots or ties. Six different experiences of migration, tumbling together like dice on a gambling table: where does society place its bets? Our combined studies shed some novel insight into these varied experiences of migration of Latinos in the US, and some of their related information practices.

Through two separate but convergent studies with migrants, we found a variety of information practices that change in relation the particular moment and motivations in the migration journey of each one (departing, staying or returning, willingly or unwillingly), and on their particular social, economic and legal situation. In all cases,

the experience of migration involves a dynamic relation with their surroundings that invokes different information practices and uses of information technologies. There is no clear, linear progression between migration "stages" as suggested by Caidi et al (2010)[6], but a complex and iterative web of interactions in the "liminal" space of migration where information is the glue that connects migrants to each other and to their original, transitional or new place of destination and belonging. As vulnerability and uncertainty increase, so does the reliance on word of mouth and interpersonal relations, but as the sense of safety and permanence increase, so does the use of broader and more diffuse networks, and of information technologies for self-expression and affirmation.

Both studies find that transnational migrant experiences are in a permanent cycle of transition and connection between different social, political and economic worlds. This implies a daily experience of different times, places and languages (codes), as well as differential, but connected cultural, institutional and technological rules and practices. The two studies also found similarities in the strong sense of vulnerability and strangeness legal and undocumented migrants experienced during their migratory journeys, and how technologies such as mobile phones or social media can have ambiguous uses and meanings. In some cases, they endanger the lives and freedom of migrants, while in other cases they offer the possibility of connection with family and friends as well as important forms of social expression and participation. Moreover, the combination of old and new communication and information technologies have a strong power in weaving and enabling the creation and consolidation of social memories and models that impact emotions, reasons and actions of many people who decide to move from their original territories.

The ICT in the hands of migrants are making viable their opportunities to express their own identities and their political, cultural and economic representations and practices. ICT are also providing them with material resources to be connected and informed faster as well as to share different times and spaces, both in their original and destination countries. Migrants, particularly undocumented migrants, represent a huge challenge as well as an enormous opportunity for new forms of nationhood, identity, justice and social inclusion. However, migrants, especially undocumented migrants, are the expression of deprivation of basic human rights for a whole group of society. By excluding them from legality, the state places undocumented migrants outside the boundaries of law, while selectively applying laws to systematically exclude them.

In such a context, this paper seeks to contribute to the small but growing body of work on information practices of undocumented migrants, and to contribute a small step to help them regain their full sense of humanity and bios, the qualified life that is the opposite of the bare life of homo sacer.

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