

Parallel Paper of Global Media Journal Editions

Infrastructuring the Digital Border: Surveillance, Political Subjectivization, and the Struggle against the Border-Industrial Complex

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Abstract: Digital border infrastructures are commonly criticized for violating migrants' rights through intrusive surveillance and automated decision-making. This essay argues that such critiques remain fundamentally limited. The problem is not that border technologies are misused, but that the inherently violent and exclusionary logic of borders has become fused with techno-solutionist promises and transformed into a profitable business model. Rather than merely governing migration, digital border infrastructures produce the very conditions that legitimize their continuous expansion. Bringing together critical migration studies, science and technology studies, media and communication studies, and reflections from migrant solidarity activism, the essay conceptualizes digital border infrastructure as simultaneously material, discursive, and economic. It argues that infrastructures not only reorganize practices of bordering but also shape the production of visibility, knowledge, and political subjectivities. Securitized representations of migration are therefore not external narratives about the border; they are embedded in the infrastructures through which migration is governed and become part of a self-reinforcing cycle of border militarization. Building on this critique, the essay questions political strategies centered on human rights, counter-surveillance, or the production of visibility. Instead, it proposes shifting attention toward the digital border infrastructure itself and its material entanglements with policing and warfare. Such a perspective opens possibilities for reformulating border abolitionist politics beyond migration and toward broader struggles against militarization and surveillance.

Keywords: digital border, digital border infrastructure, infrastructural mediation, migration, media representation, border technology, border-industrial complex

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In summer 2023, I returned to the Bosnian-Croatian border for field research on the use of technology within the EU border regime. Two years earlier, I had been in the same place, volunteering with a small collective that provided stoves and firewood to illegalized migrants in order to enable a more autonomous life in abandoned houses outside of refugee camps. During those two years, the situation in the border town had changed completely. In 2021, the role of the place as a zone of transit had been obvious, with migrants being highly visible in the public life of the town. This changed entirely after my return in 2023: many houses were no longer inhabited by illegalized migrants. In light of our research on the use of technology within the EU border regime, it seemed evident that this absence was the result of the increasingly surveilled border. In the preceding years, an accelerated militarization of the Bosnian-Croatian border had taken place, deploying a whole arsenal of digital border infrastructure – from cameras and drones to radars and IMSI-catchers tracking phones – accompanied by a general expansion of the Croatian border police’s capacities, driven in part by Croatia’s accession to the Schengen area in January 2023 (Schöll et al., 2024). Although the technologization of borders did not simply emerge in recent years but is embedded in a longer continuity of identification and registration technologies within border governance (Canzutti & Tazzioli, 2023), a wide-ranging datafication of mobilities and borders has taken place in recent decades (Lemberg-Pedersen & Haioty, 2020, p. 608; Witteborn, 2022). Digital infrastructuring is often understood as a reaction to illegalized cross-border mobility (Trauttmansdorff & Felt, 2023, p. 636), following the narrative of a technological fix (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019). Within the EU border regime, identities are tracked through biometric recognition such as fingerprints and iris scans (Lemberg-Pedersen & Haioty, 2020) and matched to individuals through large-scale databases – for instance, for asylum applicants (EURODAC) or for criminal records of third-country nationals (ECRIS-TCN). Besides drones and cameras, the surveillance of borders also encompasses quasi-satellites (High Altitude Platform Systems) and satellites deployed as part of the “Copernicus Border Surveillance Service”. The aggregated information is integrated within the digital interface of the European Border Surveillance System (EUROSUR), run by Frontex, which aims to create near-real-time situational awareness of the borders (Walters, 2017). At the EU border, AI is currently used in forecasting tools for migration movements, risk assessments of individuals, and facial recognition, while emotion recognition remains at the testing stage (Rinaldi & Teo, 2025). Digital media is used in campaigns to deter migrants (Musarò, 2019, p. 2) and within the reception infrastructure. For instance, WhatsApp and Viber are deployed for communication between asylum applicants and government institutions in Greece (Canzutti & Tazzioli, 2023, p. 6).

This technologization of borders has impacted the techniques and practices of bordering (Vukov & Sheller, 2013): enhanced surveillance and digital identification technology enable, for instance, the externalization of borders, while biometric identification and mass surveillance feed into their internalization. Practices of illegalized border crossing are also increasingly shaped by digital infrastructure. The con-

cept of the “digital passage” captures how refugees rely on communication technology during their journeys – for instance, using social media to share information and routes, or smartphones for navigation and communication – (Richter et al., 2019) which the police in turn appropriate for surveillance, such as phone tracking or smartphone screening in the asylum procedure (Latonero & Kift, 2018; Leurs et al., 2025).

When returning to the Bosnian-Croatian border in 2023, the picture emerging from our conversations with illegalized migrants, local inhabitants, activists, researchers, and journalists pointed to such a shift in the practices of bordering and crossing following the deployment of digital border infrastructures. Passing the border on foot without being detected had become significantly more difficult. In 2021, most illegalized migrants attempted to cross the EU border on foot, which frequently led to illegal pushbacks often marked by brutal violence by the Croatian police. Many reported making several dozen crossing attempts, but eventually reached their destination countries. Two years later, illegalized migrants were barely visible in the border areas, and it is plausible that the expanded digital surveillance infrastructure played a central role in this shift. Yet not only migrants were barely perceptible during our field research – the border itself was practically invisible, aside from road signs and a few official checkpoints hinting at the territorial boundary. During our trip through the northern border region, it was rather striking how hard it was to find evidence of the border infrastructure that seemed to have such a far-reaching impact. But this did not mean that borders and illegalized migration had fully disappeared from public view. While having dinner in a Croatian town, the large television in a small restaurant showed a report about a group of illegalized migrants who had been intercepted that same day around a hundred kilometers away. The supposed invisibility quickly gave way to a mediated hyper-visibility of migrants, with heavily armed police serving as a backdrop to the live report.

The increasing transformation of state borders into a digital border infrastructure not only shapes the possibilities and practices of illegalized crossings, but also the way borders and migration are publicly mediated and, subsequently, how conflicts around mobilities are articulated. In the following article, I delve into this topic and analyze how the increased deployment of digital border infrastructure transforms the conflicts surrounding cross-border mobilities and struggles for border abolitionism. On this basis, I discuss the potentials and limitations of strategies of solidarity with illegalized migrants, drawing on academic literature and reflecting on my practical experience in solidarity work at the Bosnian-Croatian border. I bring the literature on the deployment of technology, primarily from the angle of Science and Technology Studies (STS), into dialogue with research centering the economic dimensions of border militarization and the emergence of a border-industrial complex. In doing so, I discuss the mediation of bordering and mobilities through the digital border infrastructure. In the first section, I argue that struggles over mobilities and their discursive mediation are fundamentally structured through digital border infrastructures. I analyze how political strategies aimed at creating visibility

for the perspectives of illegalized migrants or for the violence of borders are limited, as they mostly fail to account for how (in)visibilities are infrastructurally mediated. In the second section, I argue that the securitized discourse on migration – which has evolved alongside the militarization of borders over the past two decades (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019) – legitimizes and reinforces continuous militarization within a border-industrial complex. Through mobilizing key insights from STS, I situate the inherent limitations of technology and the agency of migrants as part of a continuous reproduction of illegalized migration. In the third section, I discuss how the mediating role of the digital border infrastructure shapes the way struggles over and against borders are understood. I emphasize the multiplicity and contradictory nature of mobilities and borders, and argue for the need to take the mediation of struggles within and against borders into account. In the last section, I propose countering the digital border infrastructure as a strategy for extending the struggle for border abolitionism beyond the issue of migration, and connect it – following the technology – with struggles against militarization, mass policing, and beyond.

The Infrastructural Mediation of Mobilities and Borders

While infrastructure is commonly understood as a material substrate upon which systems – such as railroads, software, or trade – run and are maintained, media scholar Susan Leigh Star emphasized that infrastructure also encompasses non-material elements such as standards, norms, and practices (Gießmann & Taha, 2017, pp. 52–53). In this sense, border infrastructures can be understood as “the subtle modes, techniques, or strategies for moving people” (Trauttmansdorff, 2023, p. 144). Infrastructure is not merely the outcome of social and political action; it can serve as an instrument of violence and reinforce injustice, while also having the potential to reverse unjust social relations (Parks & Starosielski, 2015, pp. 11–12) – for instance, in the shutdown of the internet as a tool of repressing protest, in the use of digital media platforms for organizing protest movements (Tufekci, 2017), or to manufacture consent for securitization and border regimes. The impact of technology can thus be analyzed either negatively, in terms of deficits, such as inadequate reception infrastructure, or in terms of utilization, such as the use of border surveillance to deter migrants (Erdener, 2021, pp. 130–131). Media infrastructures are “situated sociotechnical systems that are designed and configured to support the distribution of audiovisual signal traffic” (Parks & Starosielski, 2015, p. 4). This is discussed from a variety of angles, including the affordances of platforms (Bock et al., 2021), the role of platformization for digital capitalism (Fuchs, 2022; Srnicek, 2019), or the datafication of human behavior (Mejias & Couldry, 2019). This research shares a general view that media infrastructures impact the social relations, practices, and content embedded within them.

Dijstelbloem (2021) stresses that border infrastructures not only govern mobilities of migrants but also shape the distribution of knowledge and information. In a broader sense, borders are central to how we understand the conflicts surrounding mobilities: “Border infrastructures create specific political relationships, not only

with the people crossing borders who are subject to monitoring, but with those who monitor the border and its technopolitics” (Dijstelbloem, 2021, p. 150). Similarly, Erdener emphasizes to the constitutive role of border infrastructure for political conflicts over borders, arguing that border infrastructure and its breakdowns “mediate and communicate claims to territory, political recognition, and legitimacy,” turning border infrastructure into a key site of ideological contestation (2021, p. 129). This points to how digital border infrastructure shape conflicts over borders and the formation of the political subjectivities at play – a role that has mainly been analyzed in relation to particular contexts: for instance, technology deployed by state institutions produces certainty and authoritative knowledge about migrants (Amelung et al., 2024), automated border control generates suspicion toward migrants, border guards, and the technology itself (Noori, 2022), and digital bordering practices create an “imaginary of abstract quantification and automation based on the premises of efficiency, transparency, and control” (Witteborn, 2022, p. 168). But the digital border also contains the structures of reception that mediate migrants’ encounters with Europe (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2017).

The Securitization of Mobilities

Research on the deployment of surveillance technology oscillates between emphasizing the enhanced capacity of borders to detect and deter illegalized migrants (for instance Molnar, 2024) and stressing the inherent limitations of technology in doing so (for instance Scheel, 2021). When I returned to the Bosnian-Croatian border in 2023, the impression arose that the accelerated deployment of surveillance technologies in the preceding years had made it increasingly impossible to illegally cross the border. However, from conversations with residents, migrants and activists it became clear that illegalized crossings did not simply end with the digital border infrastructure, but that tactics shifted toward an increasing reliance on smugglers. As a result, illegalized migration did not only become much more expensive (more generally on this: Sanchez, 2017), but has also become far less visible in the public sphere. This stands in stark contrast to the imagery from the long summer of migration in 2015, when refugees marching from Hungary to Germany were highly present in digital and mass media, eventually triggering the facilitation of their movement by trains and buses and their reception at Munich’s main train station (Graham-Harrison et al., 2015). The deployment of surveillance technology thus not only shaped the practices of bordering and migration, but also their discursive mediation, in terms of a more securitized understanding of clandestine crossings and their detection by border police.

Research in media studies has pointed out how digital border infrastructure produces particular (in)visibilities of mobilities and borders (Dijstelbloem, 2021, p. 27; Tazzioli & Walters, 2016). Infrastructure commonly remains imperceptible until it fails – as with the electricity grid during a blackout. In the EU context, the general invisibility of pushbacks, deportations, and border deaths for most members of the

general public expresses the functionality of the digital border infrastructure. It externalizes the violent repression of mobilities and prevents their discursive mediation, making policing of borders largely invisible (Buchmann, 2026, p. 29). During our research trip, both the border and the underlying technology were similarly difficult to detect; even forest workers we interviewed, who spend most of their time in the border area, barely noticed the digital border infrastructure. At the same time, surveillance and biometric technologies enable state actors to trace movements. Illegalized migrants also appropriate technology in both directions: either relying on navigation tools, digital networks, fake identities, or encryption to render themselves (partly) invisible to the surveillance of the border regime (Scheel, 2021), or appropriating communication technologies to intervene in public discourse and break the invisibility of marginalization (Winkler, 2022). Forms of migrant self-representation are often understood as counter-documentation, challenging media representation (Smets & Ahenkona, 2024) and enabling political subjectivization, particularly through digital media as “an important site of political contestation of the border at the border” (Stavinoha, 2019, p. 1214).

The conflict over borders and mobilities is an infrastructural conflict over how (in)visibilities are produced and over the particular ways in which borders and migration are mediated and represented. The technologies at play are not neutral tools. The digital border infrastructure carries specific power relations and affordances that shape the discursive mediation of what is made visible. The military-derived gaze through technologies such as radar, drones, night-vision, thermal cameras, and satellites produces a securitized representation of migrants as a threat, which is partly adopted in media coverage (Winkler, 2023). The visual imagery produced by drone-based surveillance is of military origin, dividing the world into friend and enemy, and thus “contributes to a portrayal and an understanding of the migrant as an alien, an intruder, an enemy” (Martins & Jumbert, 2022, p. 8). EUROSUR does not simply make migration visible; it produces an operative vision and enables intervention (Dijstelbloem et al., 2017, pp. 3–4), and the visual politics of the search-and-rescue mission Mare Nostrum produced an entanglement of securitization and humanitarianism (Musrò, 2017). The fact that military companies developing these drones have also offered humanitarian actors their products at a discount (Martins & Jumbert, 2022, p. 6) underscores how humanitarian and securitized framings of migration are not opposites but closely intertwined (Chouliaraki & Musrò, 2017). In this sense, the counter-surveillance flights of civil society organizations reproduce a surveilling aerial gaze similar to that of Frontex, which risks reaffirming the colonial dichotomy of *white* actors saving suffering “others” (Pallister-Wilkins, 2022). This representation of migration and the production of certain forms of knowledge has a crucial impact on social struggles around borders. The impact of communication around migration has been researched particularly in terms of the reception of negative media portrayals by affected communities (Karadas et al., 2017), and as impacting participation in protest (Arlt, 2017). The infrastructural mediation of migration, particularly within securitized notions of threat, adds to this and thus im-

pacts the possibilities and limitations of how borders can be politicized and contested. The infrastructural gaze on migrants – in its securitized and humanitarian form – feeds into an understanding of border struggles as conflicts over balancing security concerns with human rights and saving migrants.

Limitations to the Politics of Visibility

These considerations are crucial for rethinking a particularly prominent tactic employed by civil society actors against the border regime: creating visibility for the violence at borders and for the perspectives of illegalized migrants. During my first stay in Bosnia and Herzegovina, part of the solidarity work involved public outreach, primarily through a blog and Instagram, featuring updates and stories about the situation at the border and our activities. Beyond the implicit expectation of generating visibility for the work of the collective so that donations could sustain it, the main aim of this publicity was to make the general situation of refugees at the border and the violence of the Croatian border police visible. Yet in light of the infrastructural dimension of borders and their impact on (in)visibilities, strategies of making illegalized migration and border violence visible miss how the issue is not simply one of insufficient visibility. Migration is a prominent topic in German media; yet visibility in itself does not carry a determinate political effect. As the political right mobilizes around claims of alleged mass migration to Germany, the concern is not merely whether migration is visible, but how it is mediated. Similarly, US border vigilantes publish their activities specifically to “show the public the reality of the border” (Ward, 2020, p. 1). The reality at the border that is claimed to be made visible is itself contested. In addition, there is no shortage of evidence of the violence taking place at borders. In August 2025, for instance, the so-called Libyan coast guard fired live ammunition at the civil sea rescue vessel *Ocean Viking* for several minutes – an incident documented on video. Despite this serious escalation of attacks against civil sea rescue operations, the event generated only limited media coverage, with reports presenting the allegations of both sides (Tagesschau, 2025). This lack of news coverage, intertwined with the absence of political pressure, feeds into the continued violence at borders. In May 2026, the civil sea rescue vessel *Sea-Watch 5* was also shot with live ammunition by the so-called Libyan coast guard and threatened with abduction to Libya. After arrival in Italy, the Italian police launched an investigation – against the ship’s captain (Rüb, 2026).

For the goal of making migration visible, it is crucial to take the infrastructure mediating it into account, particularly to problematize the digital border infrastructure. In light of the ongoing centrality of public debates over migration as well as over the deployment of Artificial Intelligence (AI), it is striking how little this system of surveillance is covered, even though it unites both topics. The deployment of a high-level surveillance infrastructure at borders as a central testing ground for technologies is relevant well beyond migration – for instance for mass surveillance and AI-based warfare. It would be speculative to say why this connection is not being made. What can be said, however, is that this missing link shapes the way bordering is

understood – as an isolated case rather than as embedded in parallel developments of militarization and digital surveillance.

Mediated Migration as the Market for Surveillance and Border Technology

Within the outlined literature on digital border infrastructures, the theoretical perspectives of STS (for instance Amelung et al., 2024; Dijstelbloem, 2021), and to a lesser extent Assemblage Theory (for instance Canzutti & Tazzioli, 2023; Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2022; Vukov & Sheller, 2013) are particularly prominent. These approaches commonly incorporate the materiality of borders into their analysis – for instance, in viewing data gathering and the categorization of migrants as a material practice (Tsagarousianou, 2024, p. 2). This literature stresses that surveillance technology is not omnipotent, but that its agency emerges in interaction with its users and remains fragile, open to disruption, appropriation, and autonomous subversion (for instance Scheel, 2021; Tazzioli, 2022; Tsagarousianou, 2024). However, work on digital border infrastructures from an STS perspective overwhelmingly obscures the political economy underlying the infrastructure and technologies. Empirical studies rarely address by whom and how deployed technologies are funded (for instance Dijstelbloem et al., 2017; Dijstelbloem, 2021; Tazzioli, 2022). The political economy of borders is thus analytically sidelined, both in terms of the interests and profits of military-industrial companies selling technology to increasingly militarized borders (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2013), as well as in terms of how borders produce a marginalized and over-exploited workforce (De Genova, 2018; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). Questions of procurement, investment, and political prioritization – all central to political interventions against border militarization – remain outside the analytical frame. The lack of critically examining the political and economic dynamics behind the deployment of digital border infrastructure misses how border militarization has turned into a lucrative business.

The Formation of a Border-Industrial Complex and its Misperception

In the past decades, militarized borders have turned into testing grounds for new technologies (Isaac, 2024; Molnar, 2021). In the US context, Molnar describes bordering as a “multi-billion-dollar border-industrial complex” (2023, p. 308). Also in the EU, the budget for borders has been steadily multiplied over the past years, reaching 1.3 billion Euros for the Integrated Border Management Fund and 1.1 billion Euros for Frontex in 2026 alone (European Commission, 2025). This has produced a border-industrial complex in which political actors at the national and EU level, in interplay with arms companies and their lobbying efforts, drive the further militarization of the EU border (Douo et al., 2021). According to Lemberg-Pedersen (2013), “European borderscapes may in other words come to function according to a dynamic where the technological supply creates its own demand” (p. 161). The result is a cross-sectoral and multifaceted market for border control that relies heavily

on state funding and public-private forums, with Frontex as an interlocutor for the border militarization supply industry. Since the development and deployment of EUROSUR around 2013, Frontex has turned into a major facilitator of contracts, operating through hybrid forums of public and private actors, networking events, informal meetings, and cooperation within research and development units (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2024). In addition, European export credit agencies, investment firms, and banks – particularly as shareholders in private security companies – are powerful financial actors with vested interests in the expansion of border militarization (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2013, pp. 166–167). Thus, the importance of the border-industrial complex does not simply lie in the size of the capital involved, but rather in the institutional ecosystem of political and private actors mutually reinforcing their position and interest in the further militarization of borders.

In problematizing the social consequences of border militarization, the research on border militarization, however, risks reinforcing techno-dystopian assumptions and fails to account for how the technology never fulfills its own promises of total control. The category of the victimized refugee is mostly taken as given, rather than analyzing how illegalized migrants are constructed, categorized, and constituted as knowable subjects within particular technologies and practices of bordering. As a consequence, militarized borders are critiqued as tools of discrimination (Molnar, 2021) or as threats to human rights (Ash, 2023; Singer, 2024), while the inherent violence of borders, even absent technology, remains comparatively underproblematicized. This feeds into a misperception of borders.

Market Demands Create a Continuous Reproduction of Migrants

Particularly within political activism in solidarity with migrants, the conflict over borders is often understood as one of refugees against border guards, between illegalized crossing and pushbacks, or of asylum and deportation. However, as research within STS emphasizes, the increased militarization of borders and their transformation into a highly surveilled digital infrastructure does not end illegalized migration. Despite narratives of comprehensive surveillance, the technologies deployed at the digital border are far from hermetically sealing it (Scheel, 2021). The autonomy of migration and the inherent limitations of technologies are central to the border industry, as continuous illegalized migration produces the demand for further securitization. The deployment of technology at borders does not simply prevent migration; it inaugurates a market relation in which preventing illegalized migration is the demand for which surveillance technologies are the product. The mediation of illegalized migration plays a crucial role in this, as a highly securitized discourse on migration is both the result and the basis of this cycle of militarization: the increased deployment of military equipment at the border produces a visual construction of threat, which in turn serves as political legitimization for higher budgets for bordering and further militarization (Simonneau, 2022; Trauttmansdorff & Felt, 2023; Winkler, 2023). At the same time, the lack of legal passage routes drives people into

illegalized mobility, and increased surveillance intensifies dependence on smugglers, which can raise prices for providing mobility (Sanchez, 2017). According to Europol estimates, ninety percent of migrants entering the EU without authorization rely on smugglers (EUROPOL, n.d.) – which is a consequence of increased border control. The subsequent moral panic over smugglers (Young, 2018), demonstrates how digitalized borders generate and mediate the forms of illegalized movement they claim to prevent. Since the technology does not fulfill its claim of total surveillance, and since the autonomy of migration is embedded within the very workings of the technology, this cycle has no particular horizon: illegalized migration will continue to serve as the discursive ground for further technological deployment.

The Need for a Materialist Understanding of Border Control

Both in activism and research, the critique of racist and securitized media representations of migrants is prominent. There are numerous analyses of the construction of refugees and migrants within the media, highlighting patterns such as an emphasis on economic burden or utility, limited self-representation, cultural othering, and associations with crime (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017; Turner, 2020), or the connection to crime or terrorism, humanitarianism and security (Maurer et al., 2023). While this research is important for understanding the media construction of migration, it is crucial to connect it with the context in which these notions emerge. For this, a materialist understanding is necessary – in the STS-sense of how digital infrastructure produces certain forms of knowledge about borders and migration, but also in the economic sense of how the militarization of borders is embedded in this economic cycle of the border-industrial complex, (re)producing securitized notions of migration.

But this is also central to situate political strategies of building counter-infrastructure against borders. Within the aerial surveillance of the Mediterranean, civil society organizations confront the billion-dollar border-industrial complex and its large-scale access to advanced technologies. Small aircraft and binoculars, bound to daylight and limited flight hours compete with Heron drones, equipped with sensors and cameras, able to monitor the sea for around forty hours, day and night (Monroy, 2025). Communicative networks of refugees function as platforms for sharing information and practices before, during, and after the flight into the EU, while activist initiatives have produced websites providing information about solidarity structures upon arrival in Europe. These counter-infrastructure are often lifesaving interventions within migration journeys. But facing the asymmetry to the border industry, self-organized counter-infrastructure will always be limited. From the perspective of border abolitionist struggles, it is needed to move beyond misperceiving the border as conflict between crossing and pushback, and target the cycle of border militarization.

The Formation of Struggles Through and Against the Digital Border

During my time at the Bosnian-Croatian border, the collective framed its solidarity work as support for refugees and emphasized the autonomy of migrants. The self-understanding was explicitly political: practices of illegalized migration were seen as forming the basis of broader border abolitionist and anti-racist movements, supported by volunteers and activists and rendered visible through the collective's digital media outputs. This resonates with the way several scholars have conceptualized the role of borders as producing a particular position that can serve as a basis for political struggle. In this sense, the border and its impact on the formation of things and knowledge provides marginalized people with a specific vantage point. Post-colonial thinker Mignolo departs from the premise that modernity is constituted through a distinction from an imagined "other", rendering otherness a colonial concept. He proposes *border thinking* as a mode of thought aimed at overcoming colonially shaped epistemologies of borders and enabling decolonial knowledges and practices (Mignolo, 2012). Similarly, Brambilla underlines, through the concept of *borderscapes*, the constitutive role of borders in the production of political subjectivity. Rather than treating borders as given, she stresses how they function as tools for naturalizing imaginaries, such as nationalism (Brambilla, 2015, pp. 26–27). In understanding borders as sites of struggle, Brambilla proposes the borderscape as "a space for liberating political imagination from the burden of the territorialist imperative while opening up spaces within which the organisation of new forms of the political and the social become possible" (2015, p. 18). Mezzadra and Neilson similarly reject the notion of borders as objective facts and instead approach them as material relationships producing multiple forms of labor. Borders in this sense generate a differential inclusion, and thus a hierarchization of labor. In their approach of the *border as method*, they treat borders as an epistemic angle that affords access to understanding this material relationship (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). De Genova and Tazzioli analyze how common understandings of borders are shaped by the epistemological perspectives of states, which take the interior/exterior as given, and naturalize borders through a methodological nationalism. In contrast, they propose the lens of *seeing like a migrant*, which departs from the perspectives of migrants and provides an epistemological standpoint beyond state logics (Tazzioli & De Genova, 2023, p. 4).

Mignolo, Brambilla, Mezzadra, Neilson, De Genova and Tazzioli all engage with the epistemological and ontological function of borders, while simultaneously attributing significant potential to formulating political struggles against the border regime from within. The structuring role of borders, embedded in the legacy of colonial modernity (Mignolo, 2012) and racial capitalism (Tazzioli & De Genova, 2023), assigns those who experience borders from the margins a political potential in the formulation of struggles. All of these authors do not understand migrants as possessing an essentialist identity, nor as forming a homogeneous group. Rather, migrant identities are understood to emerge relationally – in difference from colonial thinking (Mignolo, 2012) or in opposition to the state logics of bordering (Brambilla,

2015; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Tazzioli & De Genova, 2023). In contrast to STS-based approaches that analyze the subjectivization of migrants through situated and contextual socio-technical relations, Brambilla, Mezzadra, Neilson, De Genova and Tazzioli formulate a more structural understanding of migrant subjectivities.

Reductive Notions of Migrant Struggles within Multiple and Contradictory Relations

The literature emphasizing the formation of migrant subjectivities in opposition to the state logics of bordering (Brambilla, 2015; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Tazzioli & De Genova, 2023) yet tends to mirror a common understanding of solidarity within practical no-border work. In this, illegalized migration in itself constitutes the political struggle for border abolitionist and anti-racist movements. The understanding of borders within activism often reduces borders to their function as a racist border regime and conceals the heterogeneous and contradictory social relations in which illegalized migrants are embedded. However, migration is also rooted in capitalist logics and regulations, following the shortage of labor in one place and unemployment in another, reflecting uneven development and colonial continuities of global labor extractivism (Naceur, 2025), or expressing the mobility of embodied and reproduced capital in labor migration (Hanieh & Ziadah, 2023). Smuggling is a business, and simultaneously provides a pool of exploitable and precarious labor (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019). The multiple and often contradictory social relations around borders were, in the solidarity work at the border, reduced to understanding the border as a racist tool of restricting movement, with illegalized migration embodying a political practice and identity.

My main point, however, is not simply that such notions of solidarity abridge the complexity of borders. Rather, the idea of supporting and amplifying a given political struggle, centered around illegalized migration, neglects how practices of solidarity are inherently practices of mediatization, with particular logics and understandings of borders, and subsequent political strategies and goals inscribed. Any mediation of illegalized migration, which includes any communication around migration and borders, is built on a particular way in which the multiple and contradictory relations at borders are condensed and antagonized. Media work in the realm of borders articulates the multiple relations of borders in a particular direction, thereby structuring political identities and, with them, material struggles. In the case of the collective at the Bosnian-Croatian border, the border was understood as a racist border regime and illegalized migration as an anti-racist practice. This framing, however, blocked other articulations of migrant struggles, for instance, migrant labor struggles, in which cross-border mobility also expresses a capitalist logic of illegalized and exploitable labor. In this light, it is not surprising that there were also no ties to activist groups working on labor issues. The focus of public communication on the act of border crossing and border police produced a specific subject role for migrants as victims of violence, while concealing other roles, for instance subjects of workers on strike. In that sense, it is crucial to analyze how solidarity

actors articulate borders and migration, and how this opens up, and simultaneously limits the horizon for political struggle.

Limitations of Countering the Digital Border Infrastructure with Human Rights

Migrants' human rights are a central reference point for evaluating the impact of increased militarization of borders (Ash, 2023; Goldner Lang, 2024; Lemberg-Pedersen, 2024; Molnar, 2024; Rinaldi & Teo, 2025; Singer, 2024). The mentioned research project at the Bosnian-Croatian border was, for instance, coordinated by a network of NGOs that conducted parallel case studies across different border regions to be used for advocacy at the EU level and for public campaigns. Thus, the resulting research aligned closely with assumptions and logics of human rights and with the goal of a political regulation of bordering in the sense of more humane borders. This is understandable from an organizational perspective, in which border abolitionism seems politically foreclosed and even reform is a difficult struggle. Court victories, for instance, against brutal police violence at borders can hold individuals accountable and generate publicity for the practices of bordering. But formulating migrant struggles primarily through the framework of human rights not only misses how border violence is not a lack of governance but rather its excess, and how the exclusion of particular groups of migrants is foundational to nationhood in a postcolonial world order (Sharma, 2020). Problematizing digital border technologies solely in terms of human rights violations conceals how notions of illegalized migrants and the securitized discourse around borders are produced within the digital border infrastructure, and shifts attention to the impact of particular technologies while ignoring how the digital border generates and mediates the illegalized movements it claims to prevent. By problematizing the way technology is used without questioning the conditions of its deployment, rights-based approaches obscure the economic dimension of the increased deployment of digital border infrastructure and thereby center the reformation of borders rather than their abolition.

Struggles against and beyond Borders

Subsequently, it is not enough to side with those excluded at borders; one must also be aware of how the particular struggles around and against borders are mediatized, also within practices of solidarity, and how this impacts the possibilities and limitations of political struggles. The problem of the digital border infrastructure is not that technologies are used incorrectly and thus violate migrants' human rights; it is rather that the inherently exclusive and violent nature of borders has been fused with a techno-solutionist ideology and transformed into a lucrative business model. As political strategies of appropriating infrastructure, counter-surveillance or rights-based frameworks are inherently limited, I want to outline the possibility of focusing on the digital border infrastructure itself, and the ways it is materially con-

nected to other sites – particularly in warfare and policing. Many of the private security companies involved in the border-industrial complex are also developing and selling armaments (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2013), with some of the very same products being deployed at borders and in war. The same drones that Frontex deploys to detect migrants crossing the Mediterranean are also used by the Israeli military in the genocide in Gaza and have been supplied by the German government (Gebauer & Kormbaki, 2023). AI-based surveillance has long been tested at borders and is increasingly deployed in public spaces (Monroy, 2026). On a global scale, police cooperation under the umbrella of border externalization “not only aims at surveilling, preventing, or containing migration movements, but also keeping southern regimes and their elites aligned” (Naceur, 2025). The supply of surveillance technology by the EU for governing borders has also been used in the violent repression of social movements, particularly the revolutionary struggles in West Asia and North Africa after 2011 (Naceur, 2025). At the same time, the testing and deployment of digital technologies at the border is increasingly shaping a wider European security regime, in which the technologies and practices of border control are being re-imported into the core of the EU (Buchmann, 2026). The expansion of digital surveillance into domestic policing practices underlines how bordering technologies are emblematic of larger conflicts over technologization and the interrelation of big tech and the far right (Mühlhoff, 2026). The multiple connections between the repression of the freedom of movement through digital border infrastructure and the repression of political movements beyond point to the possibility of a wider political mobilization around digital surveillance infrastructure. These interrelations open up possibilities of reformulating political struggles against border militarization, based on a different condensation of political conflict lines and with differently articulated political subjectivities, ones that overcome the dichotomy of migrants and (supportive) nationals. Such organizing could center digital fascism, militarization, or mass policing.

Given the economic interests of the border-industrial complex in expanded surveillance, it is crucial to orient political strategy at the economic level. Problematizing the funding of the border-industrial complex through public money (Akkerman, 2021) is one step in this direction. Political struggles could further target the specific funding structures of the military-industrial complex, which plays a crucial role in the externalization of EU borders (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2013, p. 158). In addition, organizing workers within tech companies would arguably be the most effective means of disrupting the economic reproduction of the border-industrial complex. Examples of pilots preventing deportations offer one striking illustration of the power workers hold in relation to struggles against the border regime (Ecre, 2019). Yet organizing workers against deportations and borders is obviously extremely difficult, particularly in tech companies, where unionization rates are generally low and workers have limited incentive to undermine the economic basis of their employment. Here, border abolitionist movements could learn from broader anti-militarization struggles, which have grappled with analogous dilemmas in mobilizing against arms companies.

Illegalized migrants have served as testing grounds for surveillance technology that is increasingly extended toward the broader population. This could provide new ground for political subjectivization in the struggle against the securitized border, moving away from humanitarian narratives of victimized migrants and toward a shared opposition to surveillance capitalism, in which the profits of digital militarization flow into an increasingly securitized society. It may be unrealistic to expect that this will directly produce short-term political victories such as defunding companies of the border-industrial complex; however, such a strategic shift could lay the groundwork for a broader reformulation of political struggles against border militarization, and for new political struggles that move beyond the categories of migrant and national.

Conclusion

The current political conjuncture is marked by an ongoing repression of illegalized migration, which has recently materialized in the reformation of the EU's asylum system under GEAS, legalizing formerly illegal bordering practices and limiting access to legal rights for refugees in their asylum process, as well as the accommodation in prison-like facilities for fast-track deportation of asylum seekers assigned low acceptance rates (Hänsel, 2026). This reform was driven by a continuous mobilization of the far right, reformulating all kinds of political conflicts around migration. At the same time, the rise of AI produces increased possibilities for digital surveillance and control, not only of illegalized migrants. For instance, several federal police forces in Germany rely on Palantir, a US-based company with close ties to the libertarian right. It provides a data interface for mass surveillance to the police – which is used even for minor crimes such as property offenses (Kullick, 2025). As I have stressed throughout this essay, the development of technology, practices of surveillance, and discourses of securitization need to be studied in their mutual entanglement. Critical media and communication studies can provide central tools for understanding this current political conjuncture, especially the political mobilization around migration and the current turn in digital technologies. For this, it is essential that the discipline moves beyond its own boundaries and connects in particular to critical research on the political economy underneath the development of digital infrastructures. Thereby, media and communication studies have the analytical tools to simultaneously acknowledge the risks of mass surveillance while challenging the promises of tech companies regarding full control, and can contribute to an understanding of technology beyond its ideological underpinnings.

In reference to the intersection of media and borders, this essay has oscillated between research on media representations, mediation practices of particular technologies, and border militarization. Even though this text has been primarily addressed to the field of communication studies, it also speaks to critical migration studies, emphasizing how political struggles in and against borders are mediated through

the digital border infrastructure. In this sense, this essay is also a call to critical migration studies to take the role of (digital) media as a central terrain of struggle over and against borders seriously – beyond the analysis of simple media representation. Given the centrality of mobilizing against migration in current processes of fascistization, critical work that understands this discursive mobilization but connects it to the underlying structures of bordering is urgently needed. For this, the connection between research on borders and media remains at the core.

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