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MIGRATING THROUGH HYBRID SPACE: NEW EVIDENCE OF CONCEPTUAL UPDATES

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Introduction

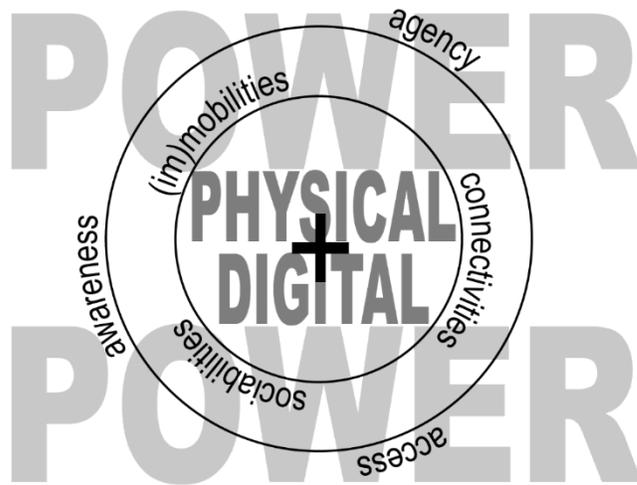
In the early days of the World Wide Web, people thought of online and offline spaces as separate domains, i.e., “cyberspace” and the “real world”. This separation between physical and digital dominated scholarly and popular narratives throughout late 1990s and early 2000’s, when people had to be tethered to physical space to enter cyberspace through desktop computers. Reflecting on the emergence of internet-enabled cell phones, de Souza e Silva (2006) pushed back on the dominant narrative by suggesting digital and physical can become integrated when people are socially connected through technology while moving through space. By walking around connected to the internet and others using it, people could experience both digital and physical spaces simultaneously. de Souza e Silva’s (2006) articulation of Hybrid Space has been highly impactful in changing the scholarly narrative. A recent review of the literature shows it has influenced scholars of communication, media, mobilities, and other fields (de Souza e Silva et al., 2025). The article also addresses the need to revisit and update the concept of Hybrid Space in light of socio-technological developments since the concept was advanced two decades ago. In particular, it raises the need to account for power imbalances and differential mobilities when considering how Hybrid Spaces are experienced.

The Hybrid Space updated model (depicted in below) provides fresh guidance for studying the complex and dynamic nature of sociotechnical situations and their multiple moving parts. The model depicts Hybrid Space as emerging from mobility, connectivity, and sociability, while recognizing that technologies of connectivity are diverse, mobility

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is uneven, and sociability can vary in meaningful ways (de Souza e Silva et al., 2025). It additionally reveals how power dynamics are embedded in Hybrid Space and offers direction for studying sociotechnical situations in which the unevenness of access, agency, and awareness, play a role in how people experience these spaces.

Figure 1: Updated conceptual model for Hybrid Space:



This submission reports on new research that leverages the updated model of Hybrid Space by recognizing the power dynamics – particularly unevenness in access, agency, and awareness – present in the way people experience (and produce) Hybrid Spaces. We demonstrate the unevenness of Hybrid Space by presenting findings from new research investigating the role of mobile media in the migration journey from Central and South America to the U.S. Southern border. Using on-site fieldwork and interviews, this research draws from Hybrid Space to examine how connectivity, mobilities, and sociability shape how people experience migration. The case of migration provides unique opportunities to leverage the conceptual extensions of Hybrid Space, while shifting its lens beyond the traditional focus on cities and urban settings. The precarious conditions of the migration journey offer traction for examining how power dynamics unfold through access, agency, and awareness. We take up these power dimensions of Hybrid Space to structure a discussion of findings from the migration study to illustrate conceptual updates.

Methods

Between August 2023 and February 2024 we conducted 21 interviews with migrants who journeyed from South and Central America to the US border. Interviews were arranged with the support of two non-profit organizations. One provides shelter to asylum seekers in El Paso, TX and in Las Cruces, NM, and the other one supports financially and with transportation deported Guatemalans. The researchers also conducted on-site visits and fieldwork at the shelters.

Power Negotiations: Access, Agency, Awareness

de Souza e Silva et al. (2025) proposed that power asymmetries in Hybrid Spaces manifest across three levels of the individual experience – access, agency, and awareness. Access refers to the extent to which a technology is available for use, including the quality of available usage. Agency involves one’s level of choice in how they deploy networked technologies and infrastructures. Awareness refers to the extent to which one is conscious of their participation in Hybrid Space. This submission takes up the concept of Hybrid Space and its power dimensions of access, agency, and awareness to structure the analysis of the migrants’ journeys are enabled and constrained. We use the analysis to inform recommendations for how scholars can approach future research that helps further advance our understanding of Hybrid Spaces in a variety of settings and contexts.

Access

Our data reveals how access difficulties influence mobility and connectivity. For example, interviewees who crossed the Darien Jungle passed on information about wi-fi spots describing a specific mountaintop where there was a wi-fi signal. Another example is a man from Venezuela who shared that he met a migrant who was traveling with SIM cards to use in each country, and women reported hiding their phones between their breasts to protect access, in case criminals would inspect their bodies.

Agency

The most prominent way in which mobile media provided agency was in staying in contact with family members and coordination of the journey, including navigation. The findings also reveal cases where agency is restricted in certain spaces, which affected how they related to space. Migrants at detention centers reported feeling lost and anxious. Dead spots could generate uncertainty and existential insecurity, whereas those offering connectivity (without surveillance), provided a greater sense of security through agency.

Awareness

Interviewees discussed how the nature of the journey requires awareness, even constant alertness. Surveillance by police, border agents, and organized crime caused them to be aware of their use of mobile media, including places, times, and ways in which mobile media use might make them vulnerable. Because so many technologies of connectivity (satellites, GPS, sensors) work in the background and are invisible in space, migrants feel a constant state of vulnerability. The feeling of being traced impacts their routes and their ability for communication and sociability.

Inter-Connectedness

The findings also demonstrate that access, agency, and awareness are interconnected. For example, we see how awareness shapes agency in the ways migrants talked about not using their phones in places where they were aware of privacy vulnerabilities. In these cases, awareness of their networked surroundings helped take agency over their privacy. We also see how these dimensions of power can work against one another, such as cases where agency was used to overcome barriers to access. For example, when phones are confiscated during detention, some migrants come up with ways of secretly passing messages and information to loved ones.

Concluding Remarks

This presentation shows how the concept of Hybrid Space provides guidance for identifying and organizing theoretically-informed variables, while highlighting conditions of power (i.e., access, agency, awareness) that make them uneven. By presenting conceptual updates and illustrating them with new findings, this presentation helps pave the way forward for scholarship on Hybrid Spaces as they continue to become increasingly embedded into everyday life and take on new formations.

References

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