

Migrant and Refugee Students in New Experiences of Family Ties: Media, Surveillance and Sociability

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ABSTRACT

Based on the highly mediatized arrival of migrants and refugees in Greece, over the last decades, this paper focuses on media technologies consumption of Albanian and Syrian students, and analyzes the way family ties are experienced at a distance. Civil wars, anti-regime protests, economic difficulties and climate change have forced large numbers of people to escape from their countries, to live as refugees or displaced from their homeland and to remain in a context of surveillance, uncertainty and insecurity. Media technologies and digital platforms contribute to the communication of family members and national communities in diaspora, give access to information and education. Thus, the aim of this paper is to describe the new experiences of sociability and education for children who have been, or still are in transition and temporary situation. Drawing on two ethnographic studies - one in 2005 on migrant children from Albania living in the agricultural area in Greece, and the other on Syrian refugee families staying in a refugee camp in Athens - the paper presents everyday media practices in the context of the mobility.

Keywords: Digital Technologies, Family Ties, Sociability, Migrant Students.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The large flow of migrants and refugees to Greece started in the early 1990s with the arrival of a huge number of economic migrants from Albania, and kept on recently, in 2015, with the escape of refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, the Iraq, Somalia. The land border between Greece and Albania, on the one hand, and the maritime boundary between Turkey and Greece, on the other, used to be the main entry points of irregular migrants and refugees. Over these years, there have been extensive debates about their integration in host countries, their acceptance from local societies, discussions about their experiences of keeping family ties at a distance, the interaction with their diaspora, and the access to inclusive education systems.

This paper draws on the findings of two ethnographic researches; the first was conducted in the early 2000s, on the Albanian students in the region of Argolida, Greece, and the other in 2020 on Syrian refugee families in Athens. The aim of this paper is to approach the way media technologies strengthen Albanian and Syrian students to redefine relationships among members of transnational families, experience a “sense of family” and sociality from a distance, and use media products as part of an “informal” educational process. The “old” media, such as television and radio, and the so-called “new media”, social networks and digital platforms, “mediate” in a relationship between them and the wider political, economic and cultural context of consumption. In these contexts, family relations and sociability among students - relations of physical co-existence or “digital co-presence” - are formed and redefined.

Since 1990, migrant families had the option of communication with their relatives by making expensive phone calls, exchanging letters, printed photos (Papailias, 2015), recording messages on cassettes and videotapes. Over the years, they can text messages on mobile phones or/and send e-mail, in order to communicate with their families back in homeland or in diaspora (Madianou & Miller, 2012, pp. 59, 110). These “bridges of constant communication” (Parreñas 2001, p. 142) can make separation sustainable, maintain intimacy, prove love, and redefine a family at a distance. Today, digital technologies have become the pivotal issue in migration studies. The increase in migration and refugee flows worldwide coincides with the growth of digital technology practices in everyday life. Digital connectivity enhances the “passage” of migrants and refugees in exactly the same way that “road, rail, maritime and border infrastructure facilitate the free movement of people” (Gillespie *et al.*, 2016, p. 2). According to anthropologist Brian Larkin (2013), these infrastructures are the “connective tissue” that facilitates the movement of goods, people or ideas and allows their exchange through space, bringing different places in interaction. Similarly, technology infrastructures contribute to the interconnection of subjects and the redefinition of “distance” and “presence”.

As digital technologies have broadened communication practices, this paper attempts to continue the critical on the so-called old and new media and migration issues; it delves into students' social intimacies and practices of togetherness or avoidance in front of the television screen or the smartphone. Thus, the main objective of this paper is to answer the questions about the way media technologies and network platforms manage a sense of togetherness and impel Albanian and Syrian students to be social within a school and family context.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This article draws on the findings of two main ethnographic research projects I worked on over the last few years. The first ethnography in the early 2000s, studied the way Albanian students from five to twelve years old, in rural area of Peloponnese, Greece were using local, national or/and global media products in their everyday life; how they intertextually reproduced the dialogues of the series among their schoolmates, and developed practices of media consumption and identity construction within the Greek social and cultural context. The second research project was held in Eleonas refugee camp from July 2019 until March 2020, when the first wave of covid-19 appeared in Greece. The camp was the first to open in mainland; it was located in the western outskirts of Athens, and despite the initial plans for 720 people, in 2020 hosted 1,200 refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and African countries. However, by the end of 2022, Greek authorities evacuated the camp of Eleonas, and transferred all residents to other places. This ethnography studied the way digital technologies helped Syrian families to experience a sense of "togetherness" at a distance; it also described the changes of the familial ties and the practices of an "imaginary family" through smartphones and networked platforms.

This paper draws on these previous ethnographies on migration and media technologies and focuses on participant observation, field note-taking, and in-depth interviews with male and female students from Albania and with Syrian refugee families. All participants are identified by pseudonyms. Both Albanian families and Syrian refugees, as subjects of these studies, are due to their percentage of the population located in Greece. Firstly, due to the fall of the communist regime, the huge migratory movements of Albanians to Greece throughout the 1990s were predominantly irregular and involved low-skilled or unskilled migrants. They were generally employed on a seasonal or temporary basis, in agriculture, construction, tourism, small scale family factories and housekeeping. On the other hand, since 2015, Europe has faced an unprecedented arrival of refugees and migrants. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), millions of refugees and migrants made the dangerous crossing of the Mediterranean Sea or traveled from Turkey to Bulgaria and Greece. While Syria crisis approached its tenth year, the annual report of the UNHCR in 2019 confirmed that Syrian refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people remained the largest refugee group with 13,2 millions worldwide. Thus, over 186,000 refugees and asylum-seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq have been registered in Greece, and the number of refugee children was around 20,300¹. In 2016, the Greek government implemented a program for the integration of refugee children in Greek Schools, in primary and secondary education, despite the difficulties and massive reactions from local communities and far-right parties. However, in 2020-2021 government policies on access to asylum, social support for asylum seekers and refugee residency have seriously worsened the living conditions of the families, and consequently affected the students' attendance at school. In Eleonas refugee camp, the Syrian informants were mainly 25 to 40-year-old, middle class and heavily users of digital technologies. There were single parents, mothers with their children, away from the rest of the family, whole families moving together to Europe, fathers on their migration route alone.

In both ethnographies I met my informants in their houses, at school, in the main squares, within the camp, in their containers, or in the nearby cafes and canteens. The long discussion with them, and my visits in their places contributed to the understanding of media use, their precarious practices on new cultural and social environments, the way media technology brings family members together and how these networked applications change or not family relations at a distance and sociality with their friends.

III. DISCUSSION

A. Migrants and Refugees in New Media Contexts

Over the last decades, Albanian migrants and Syrian refugees in Greece have a completely different presence in the public sphere and a different way of keeping family ties at a distance. Besides, within this social and cultural context, they have diverse use of media and Internet products. Analytically, in the early 1990s, after the fall of the communist regime in Albania, a large number of young economic migrants,

¹ Refugee and Migrant Children in Greece - by Region, UNICEF, 25 March 2017. See also: <https://www.unhcr.org/greece.html>

mostly men, passed the borders between Albania and Greece, through the so called “green border” which constituted of wild paths in the mountains, and arrived illegally in Western Europe, searching for well-paid jobs and a better living. Between 1991 and 1996, it was estimated that approximately 600,000 illegal immigrants came to Greece, around 35% of whom were Albanians (Triandafyllidou & Veikou 2002, p. 190). Also, in 2001 a census displayed that there were 762,000 foreigners in Greece, the majority of whom (56%) were Albanians (Migration Policy Institute 2004, p. 5-7). Migration was considered as an “escape” from their home country and an effort for improvement in the host country (Anthias, 2000; Baldwin-Edwards, 2004; Hatziprokopiou, 2003; King *et al.*, 1998). Despite the social and legal difficulties experienced on their arrival, Albanian migrants achieved to become “visible” and to integrate into the Greek society better than other non-Greeks. Therefore, a number of Albanians decided to convert to the Christian orthodox religion, changing their Albanian name to Greek, and adopting religious and cultural assimilation tactics of the “dominant society”; these practices were considered as an attempt for social acceptance, for better jobs and salaries in the host country, for avoidance of racism and prejudices of their presence in Greece. It was observed that these assimilation practices were actually caused by the decisiveness of the Albanian migrants themselves. So, from their first years in Greece, they struggled to construct their families, to rent houses, to work hard in difficult positions; they organized their social life according to the values of the host country, they mingled with the locals in cafes or shops; they complied with the dominant religious rituals, adopted consumption habits and practices to ensure the “Greekness”; their children attended willingly the Greek schools, learn the Greek language and perform competitively alongside the Greek students. Finally, they developed family based private networks of friendship and solidarity both with other Albanian migrants and Greek families.

Though, many Albanian migrants described the absence of media due to the severe restrictions of the Communist regime back home (Mai, 2001; 2003), when they arrived in Greece, they tried to acquire household equipment and electronic devices to communicate with their home country (Konstantinou, 2017). “We have three television sets, and a DVD player. I watch the TV in my room with my sister, but there is another TV set in the lounge for my dad”, said Matilda, a seven-year-old Albanian student. However, by the time this research was conducted, only a few Albanian migrants on the fieldwork had the opportunity to watch programs from the Albanian satellite television - Top Channel, My Music, TV Klan Sat, Junior TV, TV Squishtar Satelit - broadcasting on Albanian language for the diaspora. Additionally, due to their economic situation, only a small number of the Albanian students had a computer access to the Internet.

On the other hand, during the so-called “refugee crisis” in 2015 and 2016, millions of Syrian refugees, as victims of political and economic violence, as criminals that illegally crossed the border, or as undocumented visitors (Appadurai, 2016; Cabot, 2014, 2016; Chouliaraki, 2017; Rozakou, 2012), have fled to Turkey and Greece heading to Europe. There were single-parents far away from their families, mothers with their children, elderly people or whole families who started their route to Europe. These forcibly displaced Syrian refugees rely on Internet connectivity through mobile devices and online platforms, such as Messenger, WhatsApp, Facebook, Viber, to achieve their “digital passage”, their movement across unfamiliar territories with the use of smartphones (Appadurai, 2019; Gillespie *et al.*, 2016; Latonero, 2015; Wall *et al.*, 2015; UNHCR, 2016). In this “dangerous but also emotional and imaginative experience”, smartphones are “the space of hopes, dreams, and resilience, and of loss and despair, death, and survival” (Gillespie, 2018, p. 2). Many refugees experience “polymedia” environments to communicate with local, national and global communities, to attempt transnational family practices, to “constitute solutions” or “to reveal problems that had hitherto been concealed” (Madianou, 2017, p. 106). Hence, smartphones, as “a migrants essential” (Gillespie *et al.*, 2016, p. 24), do not just add a new dimension to the phenomenon of migration, but “transform it altogether” (Madianou, 2014, p. 323), changing the way refugees “engender and sustain social relations with those people who are not necessarily proximate and which generates emotional, financial and practical benefit” (Urry, 2012, p. 27).

The importance of communication practices and the necessity of the media use in the new social and cultural context is a common starting point for both Albanian families in rural area of the region of Argolida, Peloponnese, as well as for the Syrian refugee families in the camp of Elenonas in Athens. Media and cultural studies have revealed that migrants were exchanging letters, printed photos (Papailias, 2015), recorded messages on tapes, DVDs of family moments (Konstantinou, 2017), so as to communicate with their family members back home or in diaspora. Later, in order to avoid expensive phone calls (Madianou & Miller, 2012, p. 59, 110), they were texting messages on mobile phone or sending emails to each other. Nowadays, Internet and the increasing availability of digital platforms enable “connected migrants” and “connected refugees” (Diminescu, 2008) to maintain ties with their loved ones and participate in daily social and cultural practices at a distance.

According to the fieldwork conducted in the rural areas of Argolida, Greece, the majority of the Albanian families tried to acquire television sets and video devices from the very first days of their arrival in the area, with the money earned from hard working in agriculture, construction, tourism, cleaning services or taking

care children and/or elderly persons. Hence, family members were gathered in front of the television set to “ritually” watch television series from the Greek television, videos or DVDs with their favorite Albanian comedy films, the personal lives of their relatives in Albania through recorded “video-letters”, to entertain themselves with Albanian songs and celebrate the victory of the Albanian football team. Meanwhile, they interacted and discussed before, during and after watching the series or films, expressing personal opinions, social positions and behaviors of gender and age roles. Additionally, I have witnessed that all individuals in the family have positioned television programs in their daily routine, a ritual of everyday life that “accompanied” them from the early wake up till the gathering of the family early in the evening. It was also obvious that watching television influenced the children’s daily schedule, their activities throughout the day and their domestic routines. So, many Albanian students, along with their parents, planned their meal to coincide with their favorite television program; thus the meal and the program function together as an integral element in the scheduling household time. “My father is coming back home late at night and he is watching the news from the Albanian satellite channel while having his dinner” mentioned Leo, a twelve-year-old student. Likewise, Enji, an eleven-year-old Albanian student stated that eating, playing with the friends, doing the homework and studying were scheduled according to the television program. From the moment migrants experienced deterritorialization and reterritorialization, they tried to be in contact with whatever reminds their homeland, not only by sustaining the networks of friends living in the same town or village, but by reaching their homeland satellite television. Media scholars argued that national satellite media are thought to be the “umbilical cord” linking migrant populations to the country and helping them to overcome the experience of cultural separation (Gillespie, 1995; Aksoy & Robins, 2003).

Consequently, Albanian television comedies, news, or/and Albanian films on DVDs tended to bring the family together and empowered the discussion. In these gatherings of the family, the parents, mainly the fathers, assumed that satellite television programs, and Albanian comedy films on DVDs, were a essential point of contact with the cultural heritage and a nostalgic connection with their past, a “symbolic return” of migrants in their home country (Gillespie 1995, p. 21). Consequently, most of the Albanian students adopted an “Albanianness” in the domestic space, despite the “Greekness” expressed in everyday practices with the schoolmates. “As soon as we were connected to the Albanian channel, we had everything. We had a job, a house, we got a car and now we were listening and watching what was happening there, learning the news of our country” said a forty-year-old Albanian father.

On the other hand, in the fieldwork of Eleonas refugee camp in Athens, the smartphones were everywhere, dominant in everyday activities or social practices, offering new ways of communication, interaction and sociability at a distance. Men and women, young and elderly people, families with children, women with babies in their arms were moving around the camp with their smartphones in hand. They were standing alone or in groups, talking on the phone, video-calling their relatives, friends, or volunteer and activist groups, listening to music from YouTube, or taking pictures. Media scholars have stressed the importance of smartphones as a tool to maintain transnational family and friendship connections from a distance; as an existing photo album or an archive of each stage of their journey; as a way of sharing images with groups of people such as distant family members and friends (Thompson, 2009; Vertovec, 2004; Kozłowska, 2015). Still, the ongoing discussion emphasized issues of mediation of the migration experience, the integration of digital technologies in refugees’ everyday practices, and their “co-presence” in digital worlds (Caballero, 2019; Horst & Miller, 2006; Latonero & Kift, 2018; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Thompson, 2009).

Syrian refugees were already smartphone users, they had access to information about the coordinates for recommended routes, the weather, and the asylum procedures upon arrival in Greece; they were in contact with traffickers, smugglers and coastguards through websites, and Facebook pages. Abdullah and Mohammad, among other Syrian refugees in the camp, described smartphones as a place where they maintain social and kinship networks, a place of connectivity, sociability and “escape”. Consequently, searching information about their homeland, exchanging messages and comments in Facebook pages and exchanging photos through their smartphones are practices that reproduce a sense of their “return” at home. Besides, the children of the Syrian families, that attended the Greek elementary school, were using the digital technology platforms from their parents smartphones as part of an informal educational process, and an interaction in the context of the family. They sought for access to the Internet in order to watch various programs in Arabic on YouTube, to learn the language and to have a sense of “togetherness” with their homeland.

Summing up, a common finding in these different migratory movements of the ethnographies, firstly from Albania and later from Syria, is that television and networked platforms were characterized as the significant tools that contributed to migrants and refugees’ social interconnection with their families in homeland, and their friend and relatives in diaspora. However, media ethnographers have made it clear that these social relations are complex (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Madianou, 2017; Morley, 1986; Lull, 1980; Livingstone & Bovill, 2001; Gauntlett & Hill, 1999). In this complexity contributes the different family structure and the time-space contexts in which this media consumption takes place. The use of television

and the social platforms is often determined by questions, unspoken rules and agreements, which differ among the members of the household, as they are involved with varying degrees of involvement and different predispositions, having different personal experiences and understandings of their social and cultural world. Analytically, viewing practices and smartphone use can empower “affiliation” or “avoidance”; these practices bring the family together, facilitate communication even at a distance, and help the users to open up a conversation. On the other hand, these practices prevent the conflict within the family as they encourage them to be isolated, offline, or disconnected. Television viewing and smartphone use are significant places of social interaction and engagement, a source of conflicts between parents or between children and their parents.

B. Children as Active Members of Family

Albanian and Syrian children are considered as active subjects, able to interpret the cultural practices, according to their own experiences, beliefs and interactions, and through them to negotiate the world of adults with whom they live (Corsaro, 1997; Hardman, 1973). Regarding the media consumption, children, as active viewers, are media literate and capable of consuming different types of programs; they are able to encode and decode the messages in the communicative process, to take in the information even when engaged in other activities and to distinguish between different types of programs (Buckingham, 1996, 2000; Drotner, 2001; Lemish, 2007; Pasquier, 2001). Many ethnographic studies have observed that children and adolescences reproduce intertextually televised narration, texts of a song, dialogues of their heroes, and they recreate these “words” in their games or in their everyday life (Palmer, 1986; Hodge & Tripp, 1986; Kline, 1993). Thus, Albanian students watch television products with their families, they talk about them at school, or in the neighborhood; they intertextually reproduce text, dialogues and jokes of the series. Similarly, Syrian students in a refugee camp watch social media videos sent on WhatsApp from their relatives; they search for YouTube videos and sing the songs they like; they try to find information about their country on websites.

In these everyday rituals on media consumption, in both case studies, the parents emerge as dominant figures that partly “determine” and control the behavior and the choices of their children in front of the television or the smartphone screen. Consequently, a common finding in both ethnographies is that the “choices” made by the father of the family are towards their children and mainly concern the daily use of television at home and the content of the programs or videos on social networks. Moreover, they make every attempt to urge them to learn their mother tongue, Albanian and Arabic. Of course, this impulse for their language depends on their decision on returning back home and/or their uncertainty for the future in the new destination. Analytically, the Albanian students are therefore “pressured” to learn their language, so they watch Albanian-language films, they listen to Albanian songs and watch DVDs of their relatives’ life moments back in their country. For example, Sara, a fifth-grade student, describe her father’s advice to watch Albanian television programs and movies, so that she can find all the information about the life in their home country, the cities, the nature, and the people’s habits. Similarly, in the case of Syrians in Eleonas refugee camp, Raed, a forty-year-old lawyer, father of two, emphasizes that his children - a four-year-old boy and an eight-year-old girl - watch various Arabic children’s videos on YouTube in order to remember their language. At the same time, Mohammad, a 47 year-old refugee from Latakia, Syria, confirmed an affective surveillance with his daughters in Syria, as he tried to control everything, to advise and to support his children, even now that he is far from away:

We usually talk about school issues, about their lessons, their friends. They have started English lessons [...], so I ask them questions to understand whether they have studied. We do the same with the mathematics; every time they answer correctly, they feel satisfied.

Throughout my fieldwork, I noticed that the sense of mediated family, the sense of home through a mobile device, as described by Larissa Hjorth (2011), no longer includes a location or a place, but rather it is shaped by all the experiences through smartphones.

Additionally, Hassan, Ammar, Samira, Omar, Mohammad and Raed, Syrian parents in the camp, keep photos from their “previous life”, pictures of their relatives, the city and the neighborhood in their smartphone memory, so that their children can get information about their country and preserve a lively picture of their past. In accordance with the digital photos, the instant messages and the video calls on the smartphone of the Syrian refugees, the printed family photos and the personal videotapes from their relatives in homeland - in the case of Albanian migrants - contribute to the construction of the cultural memory for the younger members of the family. Combining the “past” and the “present”, these practices are a sense of new experiences in their lives. Analytically, in the case of Albanian students, the printed photos from their school holidays and excursions, pictures from their life in Greece sent to their relatives back home, “document” their sociality and success. These photos showing them in new cars, in the subway, in front of computers reflect their knowledge of technology, photos of their holidays indicate a new lifestyle and pictures from school celebrations, sports competitions and performances display their effort for cultural

assimilation. On the other hand, today, in the era of digitality, where smartphone shots and selfies dominate everyday life, the Syrian students can instantly send images to their family ties in homeland or diaspora. Many of these shared photos from the Athenian monuments, the historical places, as well as images from modern Greece, the metro and the central square of the city, are not only representations of the subjects in the new context. They are expressions of a need to belong to a place and a sense of a presence in the local, social and cultural contexts of the host country.

These photographic practices from both migrants and refugees, limit the distances and contribute to the maintenance of family ties and the construction of a “intimate visual copresence”. The city and the neighborhood can be “stable” parts of the past, in which migrants and refugees “selectively” return through their smartphone to seek themselves and their life experiences of the past. Fation, an Albania father, may keep printed photos of his homeland in his wallet, but today Omar preserves photos of his wedding on his smartphone, Mohammad has his two daughters on his mobile screen just to “have them always with him”, Raed keeps a digital picture in a military uniform from his past, and Ammar kept pictures of his city and neighborhood, as a symbolic gesture of intimacy and connection with the “significant other” who is far away.

IV. CONCLUSION

The abundance of new media technologies and their increased convergence have significantly changed the interconnection of people in motion, and their sociality with families in homeland or in diaspora. Today, migrant and refugees students have been and still are in a transitional situation, in a temporary situation and/or in a situation of uncertainty and precarity for their future. However, they have the ability to use media technologies, to construct sociability, to maintain family ties and relations at a distance more often than in the past. Communication practices, today, have moved from the expensive international phone calls, the exchange of printed photos, letters, audio tapes and video tapes, the texting of e-mails, to making video calls and exchanging instant texts or recorded messages and digital photos. Summing up, migrant and refugee students, today in Greece, watch television programs and YouTube videos, they talk about them with their family members and friends, they communicate with their relatives though DVD videos with weddings and celebration events or they watch instant videos on WhatsApp from their home country. National television products, printed and digital photos, DVDs with family gathering and networked platforms are “places” of connectivity, sociability and “escape”, where migrant and refugee students continue their social and kinship networks. These everyday communication practices contribute to a sense of sociality and togetherness for Albanian and Syrian students.

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