

# Informal Networks, Phones and Facebook: Information Seeking and Technology Use by Undocumented Migrants at the U.S.-Mexico Border

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## Abstract

*This paper presents the results of an exploratory study of information behaviors among undocumented migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border. Through semi-structured interviews with recently deported and other migrants at a shelter in the border town of Nogales, Mexico, we examine how undocumented migrants are seeking, acquiring, understanding, and using information prior to, and during, migration across the U.S.-Mexico border. We document the prevalence of word-of-mouth information seeking and use of cell phones over other information technologies to inform plans for border-crossing, and explore the ambivalent nature of information technology use in the vulnerable setting of life at the border. We discuss the use of mobile phones, which help meet the migrants' communication needs and also increase their exposure to crime and abuse. This research informs a broader research agenda on immigration and information, contributes to a philosophical discussion about the morality of ICT use in the context of undocumented migration, and explores the notion of immigrant transnationalism as it applies to the experience of undocumented migration at the U.S.-Mexico border.*

**Keywords:** immigrants, border crossing, ICT, embeddedness, mobile phone

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## 1 Introduction

Sitting in a small migrant shelter in Nogales, Mexico, just a few hundred yards from the Arizona border, we are surrounded by dozens of migrants sitting at picnic-style tables waiting for breakfast to be served by a small number of volunteers. The shelter has a concrete floor and chain-link fencing for walls, covered with banners to keep out the sun and the prying eyes of “coyotes” and their recruiters. The volunteers at the shelter include Catholic nuns, a Jesuit Priest, two Jesuit novices, representatives from U.S.-based humanitarian aid organizations, and other volunteers. The migrants being served at the shelter come from many places, and they are all moved by the same desire to make a better life for themselves and their families. They all express deeply-felt reactions to the ever-looming barriers that separate them from their intended destinations, including the wall (miles of metal fencing at the border, cutting across town and extending well into the desert), large numbers of Border Patrol agents in SUVs and on ATVs, and lurking surveillance camera arrays and other technologies deployed in plain sight next to the wall. For some migrants, the sight of the wall is a familiar one—they’ve crossed, or attempted the crossing, a number of times before—but for others, the first sighting of the wall elicits feelings of futility, frustration, and despair.

At the shelter, some of the migrants we speak to are Mexicans or Central Americans who have just arrived at the border for the first time, and are looking for ways to try their first crossing into the U.S. They carry their hopes and dreams in their backpacks and look forward to a future better than what they left behind; dreaming of prosperity north of the border. Nonetheless, the majority of the migrants we encounter at the shelter have just been deported from the U.S., some as early as that same morning, others up to a week before. They were deported after being caught either attempting to cross the border clandestinely, or after living and working for months or years in the U.S., where they have left homes, jobs, spouses, or children. These recently deported migrants left everything behind, some up north, some down south. And they want to return. Which way is the way back home? Where is *home*? Is it where they come from, or where they are going? Where does the soul of the migrant live?

Torn between where they come from and where they want to be, these migrants are at the threshold between two worlds. Standing at that critical juncture, life at the border is a transient life, a life “in-between” that is neither here nor there: they are living one of the most intense, fragile and vulnerable

moments in their experience as migrants (and possibly as human beings). In these transient and vulnerable moments, our research questions are: (1) how do migrants get the information they need to reach and cross the border? And, in particular, (2) how do they use information and communication technologies (ICT) such as mobile phones, computers and the internet to assist their border-crossing initiatives?

To answer these research questions, we went to the U.S.-Mexico border in Nogales (Mexico and Arizona) to explore these questions as part of a larger research initiative on Immigration and Information at University of Washington. The preliminary findings we present here help provide a more nuanced exploration of the information behaviors and the uses and perceptions of information technologies by undocumented migrants at the time of their border-crossing experience. As a contribution to studies on immigration and information, we link these issues to broader notions of social justice and immigrant transnationalism from the perspective of information studies.

## 2 The U.S.-Mexico Border: Humanitarian responses to the “Analogous Social Injury” of border enforcement

The border between Mexico and the United States stretches for 2,062 miles (Bolkcom, 2004), from San Diego, California, to Brownsville, Texas. It is the busiest land border in the world, and the most heavily patrolled. Of the U.S. Border Patrol's 21,391 border patrol agents in fiscal year (FY) 2013, 87% (18,611) were stationed in the nine sectors along the southwest border (in California and Arizona). In recent years, the Border Patrol's Tucson Sector, which includes Nogales, has been one of the busiest and most heavily guarded in the U.S. In FY 2013, 22% of all border patrol agents along the U.S.-Mexico border were stationed in the Tucson Sector (4,135 agents, which also accounts for 19% of all agents nationwide). The Tucson Sector was also the location of the highest number of apprehensions of clandestine or undocumented migrants from 1998 (when it surpassed San Diego) until 2013 (when the Rio Grande Valley Sector's apprehensions more than doubled after 2011). See Figure 1, which includes a map of the U.S.-Mexico border, the distribution of border patrol agents and their predominance in the Tucson Sector, and numbers of apprehensions of undocumented border crossers in fiscal year 2013.



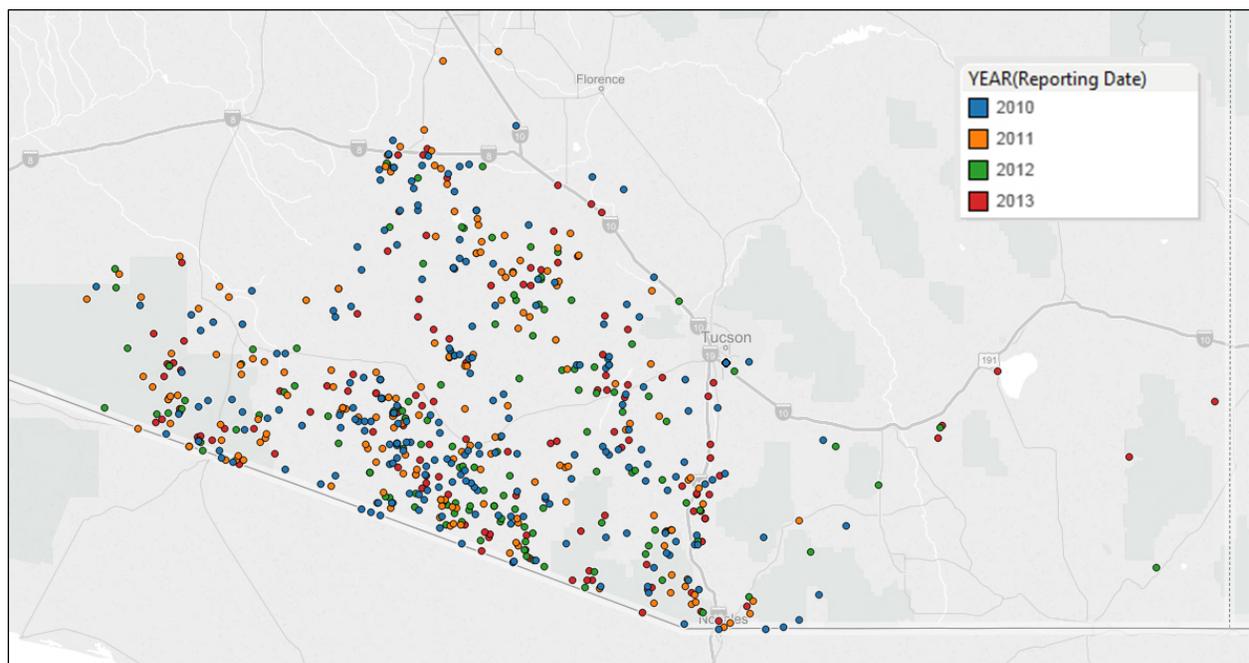
Figure 1. Numbers of Border Patrol agents and apprehensions along the U.S.-Mexico border in FY 2013. Circle size represents number of agents based in each sector. Data: U.S. Border Patrol.<sup>1</sup>

Over the past century, border enforcement has transitioned from a relatively overlooked aspect of federal law enforcement to a highly politicized and visible component of American life. The U.S. Immigration Service was originally entrusted to patrol the border and prevent illegal crossings in 1904 (U.S. Customs

<sup>1</sup> United States Border Patrol, Sector Profile, Fiscal Year 2013, available at <http://1.usa.gov/1pFgFEb>.

and Border Protection, 2013) and by 1925 there were 111 border inspectors, rising to 725 in 1930 due to the illicit liquor trade sparked by prohibition (Andreas, 2009). The number of border patrol officers doubled from 3,389 to 8,200 between 1993 and October 1999 (Andreas, 2009), and the current number of agents represents more than a 630% increase since 1993.

For Central American or southern Mexican migrants, there are many dangers inherent in the journey across Mexico to the wall itself. Once at the border, there are additional dangers, and many die due to heat, and lack of food and water in the remote areas where they are crossing. Increased fencing, security, border patrol presence along the border, especially near more urban areas, and use of surveillance technologies such as sensors and cameras, have all driven border-crossing migrants into harsher, more remote, regions. During the last two decades, thousands of undocumented immigrants have died while attempting to cross the international border between the U.S. and Mexico, as displayed in Figure 2, a map showing the estimated 706 migrant deaths in the Tucson sector alone from 2010 to 2013. Academic research (Rubio-Goldsmith, et al., 2006), and research prepared by the Congressional Research Service at the Library of Congress (Nuñez-Neto, 2006; Haddal, 2009), suggests a causal link between the U.S. government's border control policies and rapidly increasing numbers of migrant deaths.



**Figure 2. Locations of the deceased bodies of unauthorized border-crossers (“UBC” deaths) in the Tucson Sector, during 2010–2013 (n=706). Data: Arizona OpenGIS Initiative for Deceased Migrants.<sup>2</sup>**

According to Michalowski (2007), the official interventions at the border by the U.S. government have produced what is called “analogous social injury”—that is, interventions that, despite being legally permissible, result in bodily harms and deprivation, and should be seen as “the sociological equivalents of crime” (p. 63). In this light, the federal policies and interventions to enforce border protection in the U.S. have made the process of undocumented migration into the United States much more dangerous, in too many cases leading to bodily harm, deprivation, or death.

From the perspective of information studies, the social consequences of the border enforcement practices in the face of the continuing migration patterns also presents important empirical and ethical questions. The findings of this study provide a new glimpse into the dynamics of migration across the U.S.’s southern border, and of the role of ICT use in the migration experience of undocumented immigrants to the United States. They are limited in scope, drawing from a relatively small sample at a single migrant

<sup>2</sup> Arizona OpenGIS Initiative for Deceased Migrants, Custom Map of Migrant Mortality, available at <http://www.humaneborders.info/app/map.asp> (the data used to create this plot was downloaded and plotted using the OpenGIS tools on this website).

shelter in northern Mexico, but the findings provide a basis for additional research in the emerging field of immigration and information.

In academic literature, international cross-border migration has been the subject of much scholarly attention across academic disciplines. However, research examining the intersection of information and immigration is a much more recent phenomenon (which has been amplified by the increased availability and use of ICTs in recent years). Since the early 2000s, the relationship between ICTs and the immigration experience has become an important subject of social and academic analysis. While ICTs are central components in the lives of many transnational migrants, it has only recently begun to receive consideration in transnational studies (Panagakos & Horst, 2006).

Our current research builds on prior work that explores the concept of the “**embeddedness**” of ICTs in the daily lives of transnational migrants (Baron, et al., 2013; Vertovec, 2004; Leonardi, 2003; Benitez, 2006). This concept draws from a variety of disciplines, including “communication, development, linguistics, information behavior, and others” (Baron, et al., 2013, p. 100). Generally, these studies, focused on migrants already in place within their new host countries, have shown that the use of mobile phones for maintaining connectivity with others across borders “is at the heart of their lives” (Vertovec, 2004, p. 223). Other studies, such as that by Leonardi (2003), have found that Latino migrants in the U.S. preferred to use cell phones as their dominant form of communication, and that computers and the internet were not viewed as “technologies that helped keep people connected” (p. 172). Social networking websites, such as Facebook, of course, did not exist at that time (2003). In a later study, Benitez (2006) found that although Salvadorian immigrants in the Washington, D.C. area had limited access to the internet, they perceived it as a useful tool for communicating with family in other parts of the world. Baron, et al. (2013) suggest that this body of literature requires us to consider both the ICTs as a form of “homeland connection” and “as a distinct phenomenon” (p. 100). Thus when examining the information behavior of immigrants, researchers should recognize that “Migrants therefore exist in a world of ‘**in-betweenness**,’ negotiating cultural forms and identities at the crossroads of the nation-state and global diasporas” (Baron, et al., 2013, p. 100, emphasis added, *citing* Srinivasan & Pyati, 2007, p. 1735).

Another relevant concept that has received attention in the literature is that of **transnational social fields**, defined as “a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed” and which transcend nation-state boundaries (Levitt and Schiller, 2004; *see also* Horst, 2006). This theory will inform the way we will approach understanding the complex networks that provide information to potential migrants prior to their decision to migrate to the United States. The idea of **immigrant transnationalism**, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with how immigrants participate, on a daily or regular basis, in social, economic, or political activities that span national borders (Lima, 2010; Benitez, 2006). The emergence and development of ICTs, such as mobile telephony and the internet, has spurred the growth of transnationalism amongst migrant populations, perhaps more than any other factor (Lima, 2010).

Researchers have investigated the impacts of ICT use on the experience of immigration and immigrant transnationalism. Generally, this research has focused on migrant use of the internet (Panagakos and Horst, 2006), rather than other forms of ICT appropriation such as mobile telephony. Panagakos and Horst (2006) specifically state that “more attention needs to be directed to the variety of ICTs utilized in transnational social spheres and towards understanding the implications of these increasingly mediated relationships.” Researchers have conducted studies to determine the “scope of transnational practices among particular immigrant populations” (Levitt and Schiller, 2004; *see also* Wilding, 2006; Benitez, 2006; Horst, 2006; Portes, Haller and Guarnizo, 2002; Guarnizo, Portes and Haller, 2003; Itzigsohn and Saucedo, 2002). However, a very limited amount of research has examined the use of ICTs *prior to or during migration*—for example, to understand the type and amount of information potential migrants seek and gather about the migration experience, what sources they turn to for this information, and how they understand the risks involved in crossing into the U.S.

Our research focusing on investigating ICT use by migrants prior to and *during* the border-crossing experience suggests that ICTs only supplement more low-tech, interpersonal information-related practices, primarily word of mouth and the use of cell phones, which ultimately provide migrants with more, and more credible, migration-related information. Past research shows that migrants acquire information about the state of employment in the U.S. and the dynamics of crossing the border from a

variety of sources, including from friends or family members currently living or working in the U.S. or who have previously crossed the border in an undocumented fashion, or by drawing on their own cultural knowledge and social connections or that of others hired to lead them across (see de León, 2012; Spener, 2009). Anthropologist Jason de León's work also demonstrates that border crossing material culture has become "standardized" over the past 20 years, as migrants have routinely used low-tech technologies such as black clothing, black water bottles, and cheaply-made tennis shoes (de León, 2012). However, understanding whether, and how, the use of more technologically-sophisticated ICTs by migrants (as well as by the humanitarian volunteers who help them and "coyotes" (Spener, 2009)) has impacted and supplemented more traditional information-sharing networks and border-crossing behaviors, can help shed light on additional information-related practices of migrants preparing for and undertaking the illegal cross-border trek.

### **3 Research Methods: Semi-structured interviews and qualitative coding**

This work is part of a larger on-going research project investigating the role of information, technology, and surveillance in the lives of undocumented migrants attempting to cross clandestinely into the United States from Mexico and Central or South America. In May 2014 we conducted 38 interviews with migrants and volunteers at a day shelter for migrants in Nogales, Mexico. Additional on-going research will supplement these findings with further data collection at additional research sites along the border, as well as with undocumented migrants living inside the U.S.

The Kino Border Initiative, a bi-national nonprofit organization that operates the migrants' shelter in Nogales, graciously agreed to allow us access and to conduct interviews with the migrants and aid-workers at their facility. We conducted informal and semi-structured interviews with three types of subjects: (1) individuals who had been recently deported from the United States (generally within a few days of deportation, n=22), (2) migrants from Central America who had just arrived at the border with plans to cross into the United States in a clandestine fashion (n=4), and (3) migrant-aid workers affiliated with local and bi-national humanitarian organizations and who provide services at the shelter on a regular or recurring basis (n=12). After our presence was announced by shelter workers, we approached migrants and volunteers working at the shelter, explained the nature and purpose of the research, obtained verbal consent, and conducted semi-structured interviews loosely based on a pre-defined interview guide. Interviews were conducted in either English or Spanish, depending on the respondent. Most interviews were recorded, though some were summarized after the fact; those in Spanish were translated to English, and all were transcribed. Daily field notes and peer debriefings by the research team were also used to inform the analysis.

We interviewed 26 migrants and 12 aid-workers and volunteers at the shelter. Of the migrants, 22 were originally from Mexico, one was from Guatemala, and three from Honduras; 22 were male and four were female (all of the female participants were from Mexico). 22 had been recently deported, generally within the past few days, three were attempting the crossing for the first time, and one was attempting to cross again after having spent a period of time back at home in Guatemala before venturing north again. The distribution of this sample roughly matches the distribution of the population of migrants that visited the shelter over a broader period of time (KBI Report, May 2014).

After fieldwork, data was translated (if needed) and transcribed for analysis. We developed a coding manual based on the main categories of the interview guides, refined through an iterative process for additional concepts as they emerged in the data. After several iterations coding and refining the codebook based on a subset of interview transcripts, a final codebook with nine categories was established, and the full set of interviews was coded by one of the researchers, with spot checks by the second researcher. Not all categories coded are of relevance to the findings presented in this paper.

### **4 Findings: At the border, cell phones can make migrants more vulnerable**

According to our data, at the in-between space of life at the border, word of mouth is the most important source of information for the migrants. They may have used cell phones to contact a coyote and to stay in touch with family and friends when preparing the border crossing, mirroring the ordinary use of cell phones embedded in everyday life. But life at the border is all but ordinary. The lives of the undocumented migrants are especially vulnerable when they are at the threshold of the border-crossing: recently deported or recently arrived, with their dreams and aspirations on the surface of their skin and carrying their belongings in a backpack or a plastic bag, they are vulnerable to abuse by thieves, human

traffickers, drug traffickers, even corrupt police officers. At the border the use of phones, and especially the disclosure of one's contacts' phone numbers, are a window to extortion and abuse. At the border, the cell phone that was a lifeline and a useful tool becomes a liability, and the comfort of having a list of phone numbers of friends or family to call becomes a risk.

In the following sections we describe two of the salient findings of our research, related to how migrants find information to cross the border, and how they use information technologies while living at the border.

#### 4.1 Information Acquisition: Word of mouth to find a guide you can trust

In terms of acquiring information about border crossing, its attendant risks and practical considerations, we found overwhelming evidence that the primary mode of information gathering was conducted by word of mouth. When crossing for the first time, it was difficult for migrants to gather advance information about the journey and how to cross the border; most of the information was obtained from friends and family on either side of the border, in the best cases leading to referrals to a trusted coyote who had successfully guided someone in the past.

*Migrant: Well I looked around on my own, I asked friends and relatives and so one of my friends helped me find a guide. Just a neighbor helped me and told me, "well this person will help you" and that person helped me come all the way here.*

When all goes well the information leads to a name (or alias) and a phone number, a call that establishes a plan of action, a meeting point, a wire transfer to pay for services in advance or cash on the spot, and eventually a crossing attempt. But reality is not always that easy or straightforward. Phone numbers change, identities are concealed, and scammers abound. There is no "Angie's List" for reputable coyotes, and if such a list existed it would not be trusted. Some migrants reported seeing information about border crossing on TV or newspapers, and a few of them said they had consulted a map before setting out. Only one had looked up information online prior to leaving home toward the border.

Away from the border, cell phones are a tool that helps with communication, letting friends and family know your whereabouts and progress, asking for money, contacting a coyote... nothing unusual in the use of cell phones in everyday life. Away from the border, most of the information-seeking migrants conducted prior to actually attempting a clandestine crossing was limited to finding a knowledgeable and trustworthy guide, rather than to gain substantive knowledge about the current state of affairs at the border, risks and safety, or other possible concerns.

Once migrants are at the border, information seeking becomes more concrete, more urgent, and more risky. It is, nonetheless, still primarily word of mouth. In the experience of "Pedro" (names changed), "it's all through friends. You ask here and there, I want to cross, and who knows someone. And then you find somebody who knows someone. And they give you a phone number and you talk with someone, and that's the way you do it." The source of a guide's contact information varied, from referrals from family and friends to informal-information sharing at migrant shelters between migrants, to having coyotes—or their recruiters—make the initial contact. However, the general method—talking with others in person or over the phone and then obtaining a guide's phone number to call—was very commonly understood and practiced by most of the migrants.

Generally, the most useful information was acquired face-to-face while staying at the border. Phones were used to contact relatives back home (wherever home is, whether in the U.S. or in their country of origin). A large proportion of our interviewees had already attempted crossing previously, and had gained a lot of practical knowledge through prior experience—knowledge that they often shared with other, less experienced migrants. Much of this information sharing would occur in border areas or on the migrant trail, as migrants met each other while traveling or at any of a series of shelters throughout Mexico and shared experiences with each other. Other information was obtained from friends and family members back home. One migrant noted:

*We ask friends. So you see another person from Honduras and they say, "Oh, I know somebody who I trust." Or especially, if you have anybody you know who is already there in the U.S. then they tell you there's this person and there's that person who helps people come in so you can contact them. So those are the options. You have*

*your family there and they know people but here, we get here and we don't know anybody and we don't know who to trust.*

Interestingly, the informal networks migrants created while staying in migrant shelters provided much of the information migrants had about border crossing and possible guides. This was especially true for the migrants who did not have much experience with crossing the border, as they often reported listening to the stories of other, more experienced, migrants with great interest. This phenomenon was reported by both migrants and aid-workers, who also had a sense that many migrants learned quite a bit during their time in the shelters.

*Migrant: So basically, once we get here we just ask the people who are here, the people who have been deported, see what they can tell us. They tell us some people tell them how they go in carrying drugs. Others tell us other things and that's the information we have. So we take it from there from what we hear from the other people who have been deported or are here who have more experience because they've already tried crossing before....*

Because coyotes and local recruiters often tried to contact migrants and solicit business, some of the aid-workers also saw it as their responsibility to “re-inform” migrants about the situation in Nogales.

*Aid-worker: It [coyote solicitation] is a huge business here in the city. It's beneath the surface, but it's easy to find misinformation. I think we work a lot to try and re-inform people. Like, “you may have heard that you can cross the wall, or that you can cross in one day, or that you don't have to pay the mafia” – but just trying to reeducate people telling them that you do have to pay, that these are all occupied territories, that you can be in the desert from anywhere between a week and a month.*

Additionally, we were often told that increased U.S. Border Patrol presence at the border had caused migrants to alter who they sought out to guide them. The following quote from an aid-worker was reinforced by a number of migrant responses:

*Everyone knows that there are bad guides and they want to find a good guide... it is my opinion that U.S. foreign policy is kind of booting out the people who were the smaller operations (the people who just did it on the side, didn't make a lot of money off it), because now people are forced to interact with organized crime, people are forced to interact with harder criminals now, because they are the only ones that have the technology and the control over the areas where people can cross, unless you just go here in downtown Nogales and jump the wall yourself, but that is pretty dangerous.*

In sum, migrants find information about border-crossing from each other, from friends and family, and from coyotes and recruiters, in an intricate network of word-of-mouth communications that has no formal expression or concrete manifestation in traditional media or other sources of information. Finding someone you can trust is the most important challenge in the informal economy of border-crossing, especially in the face of the physical dangers, the legal challenges, and the presence of organized crime and drug trafficking. Phones are commonly used for communication and contact with friends, family and coyotes, but as we will see, phones pose a new danger for migrants in the vulnerable space of life at the border.

#### **4.2 Technology Use: If phones are no longer your friends, is there a place for Facebook?**

The use of information technologies by migrants, whether used in preparation for the journey or carried with them, was generally limited. As described above, most migrants had used a phone to contact someone (family, friends, or possible guide) before or during their time living at the border. Furthermore, a small proportion of had personal cell phones (even smart phones) and used them (or charged them) while visiting the shelter during our stay there.

Nonetheless, keeping a cell phone charged is the least of the problems. For the migrant in the vulnerable space of the border, the convenience of a list of phone numbers and handy cell phones, to stay in touch with friends and family and even to contact a trustworthy coyote, can also turn into a risk and a liability. It is common for migrants to be robbed of physical possessions by gangs, mafia, or crooked police officers,

and it is increasingly common for their abusers to use phones and lists of phone numbers in their possession to phone the migrants' relatives to coerce payments, requesting cash for the journey, or outright demanding extortion payments for the release of their relative. One migrant described his experience as follows:

*The mafia will kill you. The other day they caught us and I thought that it would be the last day of my life. They have these big guns and they were pointing them at us and I was thinking they were going to kill us... They took us, they took our shoes off, they took all our papers, they asked if we had any phone numbers of our friends, and that we had to give it to them. What I did was I took my wallet very carefully and took out the phone numbers and threw them out and [now] I cannot communicate with any of my family anymore; I only know my cousin's phone number but all the rest I lost, I don't have them anymore.*

One of the aid-workers who, at one point in his past, had also been deported to Mexico, confirmed this reality:

*Here and along the borders of the U.S. and Mexico, the migrant is not seen as a person. They're just seen as a dollar sign. Peso sign, just a peso sign. They don't see them as a person, but just as how much money can they make. It's worth money. So the migrant who comes here, they have relatives on the other side who are going to help them, so what do they do? They extort their family members, they get their phone numbers and try to extort the family. And their families, just to try to protect their relatives, they do whatever they can to send that money.*

In addition to the perils at the hands of the mafia and cartels described above, migrants also face similar risks if they use another person's phone to contact friends or family members, as others can easily redial numbers and extort the migrants' relatives. The security indications migrants receive at the shelter include a new "border etiquette" for use of payphones and cell phones. In the vulnerable space of the border, migrants are instructed to delete the last phone number dialed in a payphone (so that someone else cannot hit redial and reach the number the migrant had just called), and they are warned not to accept free calls from people on the street, even if they pose as coyotes: by doing so they are leaving their relatives' phone numbers in someone else's cell phone, thereby exposing their relatives to fraud and extortion.

The KBI shelter where we conducted our study, like other migrant shelters in Nogales and along the U.S.-Mexico border, offers migrants the use of "safe" cell phones for short calls to friends and family, among other services. A phone call can sometimes be more precious than food, shelter or shoes, but placing the call from the wrong device may further endanger the already precarious existence of the migrants living at the border, and of their relatives. To further complicate matters, some migrants report that their relatives will not answer calls that come from a number they don't recognize, to minimize exposure to fraud and extortion, which results in also excluding the "safe" phones at the shelter.

In this context, it was not surprising to hear a migrant indicating that he wanted to use Facebook to store contact information, because then he wouldn't risk losing the ability to contact family or friends, and his family wouldn't be put at risk. (Although, objectively, it is unclear whether the use of Facebook would actually achieve these aims in the long run, as Facebook accounts could also be compromised; though it does reduce reliance on physical artifacts that can be more easily stolen). Another young migrant expressed a sentiment common in much of the world (but relatively uncommon among the migrant population we interacted with):

*In a way, ever since I started having Facebook, I've never been disconnected. Even if I'm in a different place, I find internet so that I can be connected. That's what I've always liked.*

When asked why he wanted to learn how to use Facebook, another man from Michoacán, Mexico told us about his desire to use Facebook to share information with other migrants:

*I have never been in a shelter like this. And I like everything that happens here.... If one day I'm back... in the United States, I could tell friends and migrants to come look*

*for this place for the shelter. Many people can learn about this. So that I could tell other people, like other migrants and other friends, to look for these kinds of places, so that they don't suffer like I suffered. Where to sleep, or [to find] clothes, or food.*

Furthermore, during a detailed interview with another young man from Central America, we discovered that that morning he had already visited a cybercafé and uploaded pictures of the wall, so that his family “could see the wall, because they’ve heard about the wall so here they can see it in pictures... and so that way they will know where I am.”

In sum, our findings appear to indicate that Facebook may be a communication tool that is of interest to migrants, not only for the commonly reported reasons of connections and sharing with friends and family, but some migrants also see it as a way to protect themselves and their relatives from crime and abuse in the vulnerable space of life at the border. Building on these unexpected mentions of Facebook, we polled the migrants at the shelter on our last morning there: about half of them raised their hand when asked if they had a Facebook account, and about half of those kept them raised when we asked if they had used Facebook since leaving home. Anecdotal and incomplete, these findings point to a potentially rich area of further inquiry on the use of Facebook and other social media as they inform the experience of border crossing.

## **5 Discussion and Conclusions: Reinterpreting embeddedness while at the border**

Our research explores the ways in which undocumented migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border acquire information prior to and during their border-crossing experience, with a particular focus on the transient space of life at the border, where their lives are more vulnerable than before or after the crossing. Our findings indicate that migrants tend to seek information that will help them find a way to cross the border safely, not whether it is safe to cross (their decision is, for the most part made); word of mouth, and use of cell phones, tend to be the most common ways to gather this information. In this way, we corroborate prior research on the embeddedness of ICTs in the daily lives of transnational migrants that finds mobile phones as a dominant mode of interpersonal communication. Migrants use cell phones to maintain their relations with across borders, at a time where more than ever communication “is at the heart of their lives” (Vertovec, 2004, p. 223). ICTs play a role in how undocumented migrants plan for and execute their (often) dangerous journeys into the U.S. from Mexico, even when all the technologies do is facilitate direct communication with family or friends in other places. Our findings also support other research showing that migrants have begun to understand and utilize the internet and sites like Facebook for keeping connected with friends and family. Importantly, the embeddedness of ICTs in the daily lives of some of the transnational migrants we interviewed was an important aspect of their cross-border journeys. Although most of the migrants did not have personal cell phones in their possession or regular access to the internet, phones and other means of communication (such as Facebook) appeared to be important to some of the migrants in communicating with families and contacting others, such as coyotes, who would help them on their clandestine border-crossing treks. Access to these ICTs was provided either at cybercafés or within the networks of migrant shelters in various parts of Mexico.

Interestingly, our findings indicate that the sense of embeddedness of cell phones is exacerbated in the context of ‘in-betweenness’ of the migrants while they are living a transient and vulnerable existence at the border region. While other studies have focused on migrant communities situated within their host countries of emigration—at the ‘end’ of their cross-border journey in some limited sense—our findings indicate that similarities exist between those communities of established migrants and migrants in transit at the border, but that at the border the vulnerability is far more extreme, and the use of cell phones poses new types of dangers, dangers that could potentially be mitigated with the use of Facebook; we found evidence of a nascent use of Facebook among migrants who are in the process of moving across the border, and indications of awareness of its safety advantages (no need to carry phone contacts, which exposes the contacts to extortion and abuse if they fall in the hands of criminals).

Additionally, our findings are consistent with the theory of *transnational social fields*, as defined by Levitt and Schiller (2004). Although many of the migrants we interviewed spoke about their informational networks as somewhat limited to those they interacted with on a daily basis in migrant shelters and in the border areas more generally—for practical purposes and because of resource constraints—a number of migrants also stated that phone calls and Facebook allowed them to communicate, maintain social and

familial relationships, and gather information from family and friends in their home countries as well as in the U.S. To a lesser degree, we could find evidence of *immigrant transnationalism* (Lima, 2010; Benitez, 2006) in our study, among migrants who had spent significant amounts of time living in the U.S., and had participated in social, economic, or political activities in the U.S., while still maintaining ties of 'home' to their countries of origin. They maintained these ties during their periods of transition after deportation as best they could, through the use of ICTs (primarily phones). It is possible that expressions of immigrant transnationalism appear more strongly among migrants that are already established at their destination, something that is corroborated in our ongoing work with immigrants in the U.S. (in progress).

Given that a very limited amount of research has examined the use of ICTs by migrants *prior to or during migration*—for example to understand the type and amount of information potential migrants seek and gather about the migration experience, what sources they turn to for this information, and how they understand the risks involved in crossing into the U.S., the findings we present here provides important insights that shed light on some of the information-related practices of migrants prior to and during the clandestine cross-border trek into the United States. In addition to traditional, or low-tech, technologies that de León (2012) has described as becoming “standardized” over the past 20 years, our findings suggest that the while the use of phones now also play a large role in the border-crossing experience of many migrants, there are also new risks associated with phones at the border. To mitigate these risks, newer technologies, such as Facebook, which are becoming accessible to a smaller percentage of migrants, can play an important role as it is “embedded” in the lives of the migrants, and can help them navigate the vulnerability of the extreme “in-betweenness” of the life at the border.

Nonetheless, our findings suggest no evidence to show that more or better information about the risks of crossing the border is being sought or will in fact deter migrants who have made up their mind to attempt the border crossing. In other words, awareness of the increased risk of capture given higher numbers of border patrol agents, and increased risk of harm or death through exposure to heat, cold, hunger and thirst in the more remote areas where border crossing is being attempted given the securitization of the border, does not seem to be a deterrent for migrants who embark on the journey, according to our findings. Maybe the conditions they are escaping from are so dire that the potential benefits (of migration) still outweigh the potential risks (of a more dangerous border-crossing). Further research can help elicit whether failed attempts to cross the border tend to result in migrants desisting or trying again; the anecdotal evidence we collected is inconclusive in this regard. From the perspective of information, additional research can help deepen the understanding of the emerging use of Facebook and other social media tools for communication with friends and family. This may be of special significance in the context of vulnerability of life at the border, where phone numbers and phone use exposes the migrants and their relatives to increased dangers that ICTs, under certain circumstances, could help to minimize these vulnerabilities.

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