Migration narratives on social media: Digital racism and subversive migrant subjectivities
by Anna Triandafyllidou and Stein Monteiro

Abstract
This special issue contributes to an emerging literature on the role of social media in shaping narratives on migrants and refugees. The issue is organised into two parts. The first part offers analytical and empirical reflections on the dynamics of digital racism, xenophobia and polarisation on discourses by non-migrants, on migrants and refugees. The second part turns to the narratives promoted by migrants themselves through digital platforms as ways of both counteracting dominant narratives but also performing their own migrant subjectivity and creating a public digital identity for themselves. This introductory paper starts by offering a set of analytical considerations on the role of narratives in the communicative sphere in general and on the role of social media in particular with a view to framing the six paper contributions that follow.

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1. Introduction
Social media has allowed for global conversations and the sharing of personal opinions in a variety of new spaces. It is distinct from traditional outlets like radio, television, print media and public rallies because of its wide reach, intense decentralization, high level of interactions and the ability it gives users to personalize the type of information that they receive. There is ample evidence to suggest that migrants, through transnational linkages, contribute enormously to information flows across borders (Tian, et al., 2022; Dekker, et al., 2018; Dekker, et al., 2016).

Social media is constantly transforming. The creation of new platforms and functionality allow migrants and non-migrants to represent migration processes and the migrants themselves in complex ways. Social media platforms are becoming omnipresent in the lives of migrants and non-migrants alike. They are increasingly co-present (Madianou, 2016), actively shaping attitudes and views (Siapera, et al., 2018). These platforms have an ambient co-presence (Madianou, 2016) that create affordances, but also shape our views when we interact with other users and/or algorithms.

Platformed interactions can embody several paradoxes. Digitally mediated communication can afford transnationally dispersed families with enhanced capabilities to perform care work, gender roles or surveillance, while at the same time fueling family separation in an increasingly globalized world (Cabalquinto, 2020). Similarly, interactions with strangers in an online discussion forum can lead users to new perspectives, but also into an echo chamber of single-minded opinions about a topic, with serious real-world implications (Ekman, 2019).

Social media narratives on migrants are often polarised (Leurs, et al., 2020). Newcomers are represented and self-represented in networked online spaces as essential workers or hard workers, citizens (or not) (Walsh, 2022; Rosa, Bocci, Bonito and Salvati 2021; Krzyżanowski, 2018) and resilient communities (Udwan, Leurs, and Alencar, 2020; Løland, 2020; Rae,
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The first part of the special issues starts with the paper by Mattias Ekman offering a theoretical model for understanding digital racism and the factors that underpin its articulation, circulation and amplification. The paper by Anatoliy Gruzd, Philip Mai and Omar Taleb complements these theoretical reflections by offering an empirical investigation of polarizing anti-Ukrainian refugee discourses in social media. Supported by automated content analysis of Twitter/X posts, the authors contribute to a growing body of literature showing alarming trends in the politicization of refugee and immigrant-related topics by partisan and state actors. The paper by Bindi Shah on the other hand investigates the dynamics of non-elite social media engagement in Twitter/X. With a study on social media ‘conversation’ on immigration at the time of the lifting of transitional controls on Romanian and Bulgarian migration to Britain among users with very few followers, Shah offers new methodological, empirical and analytical perspectives on the dynamics of social media debates on migration.

The second part of the Special Issue turns to the performance of migrant subjectivities in social media with a set of three papers. He and Leurs analyse the platformed identities of female migrant domestic Ayi’s in the Chinese gig-economy. The paper looks at how these rural-to-urban migrants may create a new narrative for themselves by engaging in (self-)branding with a view of transforming the narrative about themselves from one of perceived low-skilled laborers to that of “pre-packaged” professionals. Earvin Cabalquinto, on the other hand, demonstrates how modern digital media tools enable Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) to capture, curate and visibilise their everyday lives overseas. This paper examines how Filipino migrants use and appropriate the affordances and features of TikTok to counter the ethos of labor migration. In a similar vein, Stein Monteiro investigates the narratives of immigrant exceptionalism as they are produced and shared in Twitter/X with a view of signaling personal achievement and countering narratives of an unwelcoming place.

This introductory paper is organised into four sections: concluding this brief introduction, section two clarifies the concept of narratives and situates it in the relevant literature. Section three offers an analytical framework about the relationship between existing narratives and the social media sphere. While section four presents in more detail the methodology, focus and main findings of the individual papers that are part of this special issue.


Today, social media platforms influence the narratives of migrants’ integration trajectories, their role in the host society, people’s beliefs about migrants and the effectiveness of policies to attract and retain new immigrants. The availability of different types of communication platforms and decreasing costs of accessing internet-enabled devices means that researchers must go beyond understanding any single media as a driving force of narratives. Instead, we need to consider how media interact to create a polymedia environment (Madianou and Miller, 2013) in which migrants and non-migrants choose certain media channels with communicative intent, presenting versions of themselves across media in more complex ways than any single media could.

In doing so it is important to offer some terminological and analytical clarity as several concepts and terms have been used in the scholarly debate. First, it is important to distinguish between the term discourses and that of narratives. Discourses involve all types of oral or written communication, not just stories or narratives (Hagström and Gustafsson, 2019). When we speak about the public discourse, we consider all forms of communication that take place in the public arena — these usually
mainly involve communication through the different types of mass media whether print or electronic, as well as the social media. When we speak about, for instance, migration or refugee policy discourses, we consider different genres of communication including policy or legal texts, news releases or other forms of public or mediatic communication about the issue.

Narratives are situated within a discourse but refer to specific types of oral or written communication that contribute to forming a story. Narratives form within a broader discourse and are fundamentally a system of stories that relate to one another creating a whole that is more than the sum of its parts [2]. Through narratives individuals weave together observable facts in order to make sense of reality and of the role of themselves and different social actors within it (Scuazzrello, 2015).

Narratives are relational, they are created through communicative interaction among different actors — they provide specific interpretations of perceived reality and organise it in a coherent whole. They involve a time perspective — they are not snapshots — but rather offer stories of what happened and how things evolved. Narratives may emerge (as we actually document in several of the contributions to the special issue) by migrants and refugees themselves representing their trajectories and providing a particular interpretation of their achievements or the hurdles that they faced. At the same time, more commonly in migration debates, narratives are proposed by policy and political actors, whether through the traditional mass media or through social media (Krzyżanowski, et al., 2018; Triandafyllidou, 2018) to offer diagnoses about what is the issue, propose solutions, explain outcomes and even anticipate future developments in migration governance (Sahin-Mencutek, 2020; Dennison, 2021).

Narratives proposed by individuals whether migrants or non-migrants about their own trajectories or about policy or governance do not form in a vacuum. They develop within and borrow from pre-existing master narratives that develop in a given society, and offer stories about who we are, where we come from and where we are going. Such narratives give meaning to the place of the individual, their community and organise their understanding of the world (Newman, 1993). In other words, master narratives are those broader sets of stories that aim to create a sense of political identity within a community and give it legitimacy.

In the modern world, a master narrative is that of the nation-state. Now for migration this may seem paradoxical as migration is fundamentally a deviation from this master narrative. The nation-state narrative presumes that the world is naturally divided into nation-states that are sovereign. These states tend to be relatively homogenous in terms of ethnicity, culture, religion. In other words, the territorial boundaries of the state coincide with the ethnic, cultural and linguistic boundaries of the nation (Gellner, 1963). Naturally we know that this is a misnomer as most states in the world include sizeable ethnic minorities or migrant populations and they are not national states in the sense purported by the master narrative. And yet politics in the world and migration policies are enacted largely on the basis of an assumption that the national state is the ‘natural’ political order, neglecting the fact that it is a relatively recent form of political community that has emerged in the last 2.5 centuries (Hobsbawn, 1973).

This master narrative is particularly important in the way we understand migration because it creates what Abdelmalek Sayad (1981) has called the paradox of migration. As Sayad argued, migrants defy the master narrative of the nation state as they live in a country that is not their country of birth and where they do not ‘belong’ and at the same time they are absent from where they should be, notably their homeland. Typically, this master narrative has become so hegemonic and banal that it becomes considered as the natural order of things (Billig, 1995).

Within the master narrative of the nation-state, we can find several more specific narratives which tell stories about the role of immigration and emigration in the formation of a national community. In fact there are certainly several dominant and counter narratives that may compete for legitimacy and meaning making in a given society [3]. It is also important to consider here the notion of inter-narrativity (Hagström and Gustafsson, 2019) which points to the fact that different narratives are inter-related and they may explicitly or implicitly invoke, refer to, support or reject other narratives.

Turning back to our focus on terminology it is important to also define the notion of frames. According to the seminal work of Snow and Benford and Snow (2000) or Fischer (2003) frames have the same storying, diagnostic and prescriptive powers that we have just attributed to narratives. We would like here though to propose an important conceptual and methodological distinction. Frames are snapshots of a situation. They put things in context, they ‘frame’ them, and such they provide also explanations about what is the issue, why did it happen and how we can solve it. However, they do not include a storying, temporal dimension. They do not necessarily connect two points in time and in that sense they do not provide a story like narratives do.

Having clarified some basic terminology issues, the following section proposes our analytical framework with regard to the interaction between actors, narratives and in particular the role of social media as a communicative sphere where this interaction takes place.
3. Narratives, the communicative sphere, and the role of social media

This special issue focuses on narratives developed in the social media sphere, on one hand, by different types of social and political actors (see Ekman, and Grudz, et al., in this special issue) or non-elite actors that express their views on migration (see Shah in this special issue) or indeed migrants themselves and the ways they counter and reshape narratives about migration and integration and their contribution to society and the economy (Monteiro; Cabalquinto; He and Leurs in this special issue). Such narratives however are situated in a more complex web of communicative and power relations. The aim of this section is to offer an analytical framework within which the contributions to this Issue are situated.

Much of the recent literature on migration narratives has focused on their content and role in supporting and legitimising specific policy choices or in influencing public opinion (Dennison, 2021; Banulescu-Bogdan, et al., 2021). Less attention has been based on the role of different actors in perpetuating, countering or reshaping these public narratives. Notable exceptions include a recent study (Broadhead, 2021) that focuses on how local actors engage with existing migration narratives. The study identifies three main frames in the local actors’ narratives on migration as these emerge through the media: control, compassion and contribution [4]. The specific study focuses on how migration narratives can be mobilised for place shaping and place branding efforts that boost localised integration stories and in so doing offers very interesting accounts on how local actors may engage with each other and the contradictions that they face since they are not directly involved in migration control — which is a function of the national government — but they are involved in compassion and may also be engaged in contribution stories.

Focusing on non-state actors on the other hand, Sahin Mencutek (2020) distinguishes between local civil society, international organisations and migrants themselves to show how they seek to negotiate and contest the dominant narratives. Naturally not all actors have the same capacity and power to contest or shape narratives. International organisations for instance are more influential in promoting specific narratives on migration and its governance compared to civil society actors or migrants themselves (see also Pecoud, 2018; Sahin Mencutek, 2020; Leurs, 2023).

Considering the relationship between different actors and the media in developing and propagating specific migration policy narratives Boswell and Smellie (2023) propose to distinguish between two types of migration policy narratives: those within the media and political debate which they consider as the communicative sphere, and those that more closely concern policy making which they term the coordinative sphere. They argue [5] that policy narratives in the communicative sphere aim to mobilise public support and articulate rival political programmes hence their target audience are citizens and voters more specifically. By contrast, the target audiences of policy narratives in the coordinative spheres are policy actors that must coordinate their activities for policy delivery. In addition, and based on Boswell’s (2011) earlier work, the authors argue that we need to distinguish between lay and technocratic narratives. Such distinction is not based on the producer of the narrative but rather on the content and function that the narrative has. Thus, lay narratives are simple, intuitive and often highly emotive stories designed to be compelling [6] while technocratic narratives are more likely to be sober, factual and informative. They will engage with expert knowledge such as administrative data, practitioner’s viewpoints and technical analysis. The authors point to the fact that either type of migration narratives may be reproduced in the media and by the media and that the relationship is interactive. They argue (Boswell and Smellie, 2023) that there is a lot of second-guessing by politicians and policy-makers about how a certain narrative about a certain migration issue resonates.

While we agree with this view, we feel that it is important to develop a more solid analytical framework in studying how social or political actors or, by contrast, lay citizens or migrants themselves engage in and with the media and social media sphere. Social media platforms have a particularly powerful role in polarising the debate on immigration (Bozdağ, 2020). Political elites tend to use social media to propagate their views or legitimise their policies or indeed to attract or retain voters (Walsh, 2022; Rosa, et al., 2021; Krzyżanowski, 2018; Triandafyllidou, 2018). In addition, social media contributes to the emergence of everyday ambient ‘digital racism’ (Ekman, 2019).

Taking stock of the insights proposed by these studies as well as some earlier work (Triandafyllidou, 2018, 2013) we propose here an analytical framework that embraces the actors that may promote, engage, shape, contest or negotiate migration narratives, the communicative sphere within which these circulate, and the ways in which they connect with and/or mobilise broader master narratives. Discussing the actors that promote, contest or reproduce migration governance narratives today cannot ignore the communicative sphere within which this happens and in that sense, we disagree with the distinction proposed by Boswell and Smellie on two types of policy narratives — we rather suggest that we need to consider the communicative sphere as the space where actors engage their competing narratives, and define the master narratives as the background or the sources that can be mobilised by different actors to promote their views (see Figure 1).
Walsh (2022) points to the important participatory function of social media as they afford ordinary citizens the possibility to voice their concerns and express their opinions. Such participation does not necessarily translate into more democratic and open debate as the nodal configuration of the social media sphere generates echo chambers while it also facilitates virality — the rapid and unpredictable spread of a certain message which then can spiral out of control. While this may generate networked publics (boyd, 2010) it may also generate significant polarization (Gruzd and Roy, 2014). In fact, there is a mediated immediacy in the social media sphere that can have important consequences for the ways in which narratives of migration governance are reproduced, propagated, often spiraling into polarising dynamics.

Voicing opinions in social media whether through micro-blogging or through videos has temporal immediacy — the moment that the creator (or sharer) of a message shares their content, it becomes a common resource for reproduction, resharing, or remixing. This is static Web pages that can be deleted or modified with significant control over the propagation of the message.

At the same time the social media are completely ‘mediated’ — the people that one speaks or writes about, whether individuals or entire communities are not physically present and usually cannot be known to the author. As Benedict Anderson (1983) wrote over 40 years ago, nations are imagined communities as members of a nation can never meet all their fellow nationals. But thanks to the advent of print capitalism they could imagine the territorial contours of their nation and grasp that there were fellow nationals living in that territory with whom they shared a common language, a shared set of traditions or customs, often a shared belief in common genealogical descent or a common religion. It was very important for the advent of modern nationalism that people could imagine the national community without personally meeting all their fellow nationals. This imagination was for the most part a positive power for modern nationalism and nation-state formation.

Transposing the imagination heuristics of Anderson to our analysis of migration and refugee narratives today, we emphasise the lack of immediacy that characterises social media communication and interaction. Social media users are embedded in a similar imagination dynamics — they can imagine migrants as completely detached from them, not as fellow community members. Such Internet-mediated contact that is at the same time temporally immediate and fast, facilitates the virality and spiraling dynamics that can easily polarise social media debates. There is little time to consider and not opportunity to meet who one is talking about or what kind of message is one (re)sharing.

While a fuller discussion of the nature of social media communication goes beyond the scope of this paper, these observations are crucial in understanding the role of a social media dominated communicative sphere that functions as the space where actors connect with migration narratives (see Figure 1).

Social media have become crucial intermediaries for distributing and sharing information and opinions that are published in traditional mass media (Perrin, 2015). They have also become important vectors for politicians (Triandafyllidou, 2018) to defend and legitimise their views on migration and its governance, for government institutions to present their policies on control and management of migration (Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud, 2020) for civil society to advocate for more humane or rights-based migration and asylum governance (Massari, 2021) and of course for far-right groups to mobilise against asylum or migration (Ekman, 2018).

Contributing to this line of inquiry, papers in this special issue not only offer new analytical perspectives on digital racism, conspiracy theories, and polarisation on migrants and refugees, but also shed light to the ways in which migrants may use...
social media and different types of digitalised platforms to promote their subjectivity and counter those polarising negative narratives.

4. Contents of this special issue

The first paper in this special issue follows our analytical reflection by offering a theoretical model for understanding digital racism and xenophobia. The author, Mattias Ekman, argues that over the past decades, anti-immigrant, racist and nationalist attitudes have been increasingly mainstreamed (Mondon and Winter, 2020), transforming public debates on immigration and immigrants in Europe and beyond. These attitudes and sentiments have not only been widely distributed, but also amplified through digital communication, including commercial social media platforms. In order to better understand the relation between racism/xenophobia and digital communication, it is necessary to move beyond media centric explanations and discussions on online hate speech.

This paper proposes a multi-theoretical approach to “digital racism”, i.e., racism produced and circulated online (Siapera and Viejo-Otero, 2021), by addressing sociological, political as well as socio-technical disciplines. The aim of the paper is to present an understanding of digital racism in relation to four intersecting perspectives encompassing networked affect, nationalism/nativism, masculinity and conspiracy thinking. The paper discusses how these perspectives underpin the articulation, circulation and amplification of digital racism. The paper shows how these perspectives could be used to understand and analytically approach digital racism on the structural/ideological (macro), organizational/network (meso) and individual (micro) level of online communication. The paper’s contribution is theoretical, but grounds its arguments in empirical research on digital racism and xenophobia from various national and political contexts. It contributes to an ongoing discussion on racism in the digital age, and critically engages with the sociological, political and socio-technical characteristics that produce and reinforce contemporary racism.

Following from Ekman’s reflections, Anatoliy Gruzd and co authors Philip Mai and Omar Taleb engage with the ‘digital battleground’, analysing anti-Ukrainian refugee discourses on Twitter/X. Russia’s war of aggression in Ukraine has triggered Europe’s largest refugee crisis since World War II. In this case study, the authors investigate the prevalence and types of anti-refugee discourse about Ukrainian refugees on Twitter. Previous studies primarily focused on public discourse and attitudes toward racialized refugees and immigrants; the Ukrainian refugee crisis is unique in that it is one of the few instances of a recent refugee crisis involving people who do not come from mostly racialized communities.

Using Communalytic, a computational social science tool for studying public discourse on social media, the authors automatically collected and identified toxic posts mentioning Ukrainian refugees during the first year of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The study focused on posts containing toxic language, as this is where it is most likely to find examples of anti-refugee sentiments. Based on a manual analysis of 2,045 toxic posts referencing Ukrainian refugees, the most prevalent ones were politically motivated and included partisan content (33 percent), followed by posts containing expressions countering anti-refugee narratives (20 percent). These findings highlight the escalating politicization and polarization of discussions about Ukrainian refugees both online and offline.

The third paper in this special issue, authored by Bindi Shah, turns our attention to the non-elite users of Twitter, notably those people who have very few followers and whose messages are generally not widely reshared. The author applied an iterative, abductive and interpretivist analytical strategy drawing on computational and qualitative social science techniques to a corpus of 47,978 tweets created over five months around the time of lifting of temporary controls on free movement from Romania and Bulgaria to the U.K. in January 2014. Initial computational network analysis on the retweet action feature revealed a small number of highly influential users and a large proportion of isolated users (non-elites) who were never retweeted.

Given the paucity of understanding of how elite narratives on migration are absorbed, accepted or contested by non-elites, the next stage involved qualitative thematic analysis of a sub-sample of actual tweets (communication) from non-elites to understand meaning-making in views expressed. Qualitative analysis confirmed presence of highly polarised immigration attitudes amongst non-elites but also revealed their values and beliefs about national belonging. These findings prompted questions about what or who influences these values amongst non-elites and whether there are any differences in information flows amongst anti- and pro-immigration users. Computational surface thematic mapping of different aspects of communication and action in the whole corpus revealed the importance of the entire media environment but also differences in the presence or lack of echo-chambers amongst those expressing anti or pro-immigrant sentiments.

The next three papers in this special issue take the focus on non-elite users of the social media a step further by focusing on migrant workers and how they negotiate their migrant subjectivity through social media channels creating positive narratives for themselves and countering negative narratives that may dominate the public sphere.
The paper by Guanqin He and Koen Leurs focuses on an understudied issue (at least in the Anglophone literature) notably on internal migrants in China, more specifically migrant domestic workers engaged in the Chinese gig economy. Despite the abundance of literature on the platform-based gig economy and platform labor, as well as a growing scholarly interest in gender and feminist perspectives in scrutinizing the platform work (James, 2022; Kasliwal, 2023; Rodríguez-Modroño, et al., 2022), less attention has been paid on female migrant laborers and how they are represented through the affordances of these digital platforms.

This paper contributes to this emerging literature by focusing on Ayis in the Chinese gig economy. Currently, the domestic industry in China has a workforce of over 30 million employees (Mo, et al., 2022). The majority of them identify as female migrant laborers, who are commonly referred to as Ayi (or auntie).

The study investigates how commercial social media applications narrate migrant subjectivity in the context of rural-to-urban migration in China. Drawing from a walkthrough approach of three selected domestic social media and in-depth interviews with 15 migrant workers from various Chinese cities and digital platforms, it deploys a feminist intersectional lens to analyze how the neoliberal formations and representations of these migrant workers on social media are intertwined with the gendered politics of domestic work.

Ayis are found to represent themselves by branding themselves. This form of self-marketing offers the potential to transform their visibility in public from perceived low-skilled laborers to “pre-packaged” professionals. While enhancing visibility, and thereby improving the standing of some, the representational practices of Ayis also offer insights into newly emergent forms of vulnerability and marginalization, shaped by gender, migrant status and socioeconomic class. The findings suggest that the digital branding of the domestic Ayis (for example with paid digital distinctions including certificates, recognition of being a ‘Filipino’-like nanny; or recruiting workers on the basis of matching zodiac signs) perpetuates gender, migration status and educational background disparities, thus reproducing new forms of discrimination and exploitation. The subjectivity and mobility of domestic Ayis also offer agency and room for maneuver as their lives are being redefined and commodified by online social media platforms to mobilize digital transactions, reflecting the shifting dynamics of gendered labor markets in China.

On the heels of the paper by He and Leurs, Earvin Cabalquinto investigates how Filipino migrants curate narratives of their everyday lives abroad through engagement on TikTok. Through a thematic analysis and a critical discourse analysis of 100 TikTok videos with the hashtag #OFW (Overseas Filipino Worker), the author unpacks how Filipino migrants create and broker counter narratives of the good life overseas in a neoliberal economy. The study applies the lens of digital brokering (Soriano and Cabalquinto, 2022), conceptualising Filipino migrant workers as informal brokers who are deeply embedded in a broader migration infrastructure. Importantly, it highlights how the brokering of subversive migrant’s experiences is shaped by the affordances of TikTok, such as the use of text, filters, stickers and music as well as hashtags for visibility and engagement with a transnational networked public.

Based on the findings of the study, Filipino migrants broker counter narratives to the sparkly depiction of living and working overseas promoted by informal migration channels through mechanisms built on the ethos of labor migration (Rodriguez, 2010) They expose hardships in the workplace, reveal self-responsibilisation of managing struggles, visibilise precarious resources and call out abuse by capitalising on relatable contents, credibility building and platform-specific and discursive styles. Nonetheless, the author foregrounds the subversive potential of TikTok by allowing Filipino migrant workers to visibilise the hidden pitfalls of an overseas life often celebrated in a neoliberal global economy.

The final paper in this special issue by Stein Monteiro turns to the narrative of immigrant exceptionalism, as these emerge in the social media sphere. “I arrived with just $1 in my pocket” is a commonly used narrative by established immigrants, in Canada and elsewhere, to signal their personal achievement or to counter narratives of an unwelcoming place. These narratives are situated within, and contextualized, by the wider discourse of “Canadian exceptionalism” (i.e., Canada as a place that excels in immigrant integration and social cohesion) and cannot be removed from the political, economic, geographical and the administration of public policy.

Monteiro collected 165 posts from X/Twitter and categorized the tweets into frames. The findings highlight frames such as “taking responsibility”, “contribution to the Canadian economy or a non-economic contribution” and “gratefulness to Canada or Canadians”. Monteiro also finds that the “solidarity” and “threat” frames were common, which is also emblematic of the spectrum of views attached to the narrative of immigrant exceptionalism. These findings suggest that narratives of immigrant exceptionalism are attached to a diversity of meanings, and the fact that it is still situated within Canada’s exceptionalism as a place that excels in immigrant integration and social cohesion, tells us something about the broad meanings that people attach to Canada’s immigration program.

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Notes

1. Part of the reflections presented in this and the following section are elaborated in A. Triandafyllidou, forthcoming, “Decentring migration governance: the role of narratives,” Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies.


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Editorial history

Received 12 July 2024; accepted 14 July 2024.
Migration narratives on social media: Digital racism and subversive migrant subjectivities
by Anna Triandafyllidou and Stein Monteiro.
*First Monday*, volume 29, number 8 (August 2024).
doi: https://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v29i8.13715