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# The Halting of Everyday Media Practices in Swedish Detention Centres: A Physical, Social, and Digital Exclusion

**Miriana Cascone**

Department of Media and Communication Studies, Södertörn University, Sweden

**Correspondence:** Miriana Cascone (miriana.cascone@sh.se)

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## Abstract

In line with previous research, this article starts from the awareness that ubiquity and mobility, central features of migrants' transnational lives, are sustained by everyday digital media practices. It aims to investigate what happens when these media practices can no longer be carried out due to circumstances beyond the individuals. The research context is the Swedish detention system, which in some cases breaks the migration trajectories and forces individuals to wait for an unwanted return. Detention centres are highly mediatized spaces where the rapid digitalization that characterizes societies is forced to slow down to a standstill for migrants. This situation marks the return of old media forms that become new, such as dumb phones and paper letters. The study is based on face-to-face interviews with detained and formerly detained migrants conducted between 2022 and 2024 in Sweden and reported here through the method of ethnographic vignettes. Offline and online practices in detention are explored to understand whether they can still guarantee the social inclusion that digitalization outside had made possible, and that here can be described as a process that follows different speeds and directions depending on the power exercised through it and its aims, leading to a counter movement. I therefore argue that there is a double exclusion, first from the country through the instrument of detention, and thus also expulsion from society understood as sociality, and this through counter-digitalization.

## Keywords

detention; digitalization; disconnection; exclusion; migrants

## 1. Introduction

Migrants are transnational beings who use digital technologies to stay connected to the society they left behind while also participating in their new host society. Media technologies are therefore fundamental to ensuring this movement between the two societies and maintaining migrants' presence in both. The media have always played an important role in migration trajectories. From letters and radio to satellite television and the telephone, new media technologies have brought transnational relationships to an even closer and more intimate level (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Previous studies (Gillespie et al., 2018; Kaufmann, 2018; Twigt, 2018; Udwan et al., 2020; Witteborn, 2018) have demonstrated the importance of media availability, highlighting the significant impact of the Internet and smartphones. Smartphones, especially, these small objects that are easy to carry even along the most treacherous routes, wrapped in plastic bags during sea crossings, have been able to facilitate travel. Migrants have become hybrids, simultaneously absent and present, physical and digital human beings (Alinejad, 2019) in a space that loses its physical connotations to acquire more symbolic and emotional ones, defined precisely as the space of presence (Diminescu, 2008). This is where the concept of the "connected migrant" (Diminescu, 2008) comes from: Migrants are no longer forced to leave their previous lives behind, as they always have at least one digital device that allows them to live different lives, to switch between them while remaining connected to them. Media technologies, therefore, are strongly emphasized for the success of the migratory journey, but also for the process of transnationalization itself, which presupposes not only a return to the country of origin, but also being inside the country and society in which they currently live. Several studies have shown that the role of media technologies in migration is also ambiguous in many respects. For example, information can be unreliable (Wall et al., 2015) and traceability can make everyone recognizable (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2022). Despite this awareness, the article recognizes media practices as facilitators in the processes of settlement and inclusion. Today, the level of digitalization achieved requires not only that everything be digitalized, but also that everyone be ready to access and use it. This means that everyone must be digitalized as well. However, this article notes that, while the digitalization process is proceeding in a very specific direction and at an ever-increasing speed, affecting every aspect of daily life, we are seeing a slowdown in this process in some contexts. One of these is detention, which forces people who were previously required to go digital, just to access basic services, to stop doing so. I therefore wonder what effect this forced change has on the lives of these individuals and their inclusion—or exclusion—in society. The question from which this article stems is: What happens when the connected migrant is no longer connected? In Swedish detention centres, media access is limited and different from outside. There are no smartphones here, only dumb phones given to migrants upon their arrival at the centre; however, access to the internet is allowed but only through computers that must be booked in advance, and communications with the Migration Agency take place via paper letters. This in-between situation, where some media are permitted and others prohibited, and where it is neither possible to speak of disconnection nor connection, is explained by two main official reasons. The first is that the Migration Agency wishes to protect the privacy of other detainees, for example, from photos that could be taken with smartphones inside the centres. The second is that, although there are no actual laws at the European level regulating detention, there are directives. One such directive is to guarantee a connection to the outside world via one's own or another telephone (Mentzelopoulou, 2023). Sweden has decided to follow this directive, unlike Denmark, for instance. Therefore, what is emerging is a scenario in which the digitalization process seems to be slowing down, perhaps even reversing course, with the return of old forms of media, such as paper and dumb phones. I find the reappearance of old media forms in certain contexts, such as detention, an interesting phenomenon to analyze. During the fieldwork, I then developed the following research questions: How do media practices take place in a context of limited and controlled media access?

What meaning is associated with the return of old media forms and how are they negotiated within everyday life? What happens to migrants' daily lives and potential inclusion processes if access to digital technologies is no longer guaranteed? The research context of this article is Sweden. Recognizing that the detention context may differ in other countries, this article aims to analyze the Swedish detention system, about which little is still known, and without generalizing about specific cases. However, it seeks to contribute to the debate on the role of digitalization in the inclusion of migrants, which can lead to exclusion. I will proceed with a brief review of the literature on the digitalization of migration and migrants, highlighting the gaps that this article aims to fill. Having reflected on the context and research methods, I will describe online and offline media practices in detention centres through ethnographic vignettes, which will reveal the meanings and effects of this counter-digitalization. I consider what appears to be a return to a lower level of digitalization as a decision with a political purpose. Detention will appear as a space of deprivation affecting individuals on a personal and emotional level, as well as on a material level. Therefore, it is within this space that technologies and the available media forms must be reintegrated, and the functions and meanings associated with them must be reinterpreted. I will argue that migrants suffer not only forced physical and geographical immobility because they are detained, but also digital immobility.

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1. On the Digitalization of Migration*

Digital technology is becoming increasingly prevalent in everyday life (Leonardi & Treem, 2020), and the idea that "we live in the media" (Deleuze, 2011) seems more realistic than ever, demonstrating the incredibly invasive nature of digitalization and mediatization in contemporary societies. Following Büchner and colleagues, this article defines digitalization as "the complex and heterogeneous process leading to increased relevance of digital technology and digital data in contemporary society" (Büchner et al., 2022). However, I will argue that it follows different speeds and directions depending on who it is used by and received by. Digitalization is therefore a social and cultural process affecting most of the world at all levels—economic and, above all, social (Parida, 2018, p. 23)—though of course there are major geographical and socio-cultural differences to bear in mind. This also includes the often non-linear relationship between migration and digitalization, which is the focus of this article. Media practices and access to inclusive digitalization are considered necessary conditions for public connection, and thus for an active and informed citizenship (Couldry et al., 2007). In the case of migrants, this also translates into inclusion in society. According to Collin, social and technological integration go hand in hand, stating that "the successful integration of migrants requires that their technological integration is as important as the social, political, and economic integration traditionally reported in scientific literature" (Collin, 2012, p. 66). Furthermore, inclusion is not only a process that concerns migrants, but also the host society, which must change and adapt to welcome them. It is a two-way process of encounter (Alba & Nee, 2003). Settling into a new community requires migrants to adapt to a new culture, customs, social values, and language. As the World Migration Reports of 2020 and 2024 demonstrate, this process is easier in a digitalized society. However, as Bhabha and other colleagues point out, digitalization must always be considered and defined critically, as it is highly context-dependent (Bhabha et al., 2021). The same phenomenon that facilitates inclusion in society and affirms the "connected migrant," for example, has also led to the "datafication of human mobility," making everything about migration measurable. Apps, platforms, and new technologies enable the collection of unprecedented amounts of data, as well as the tracking and monitoring of movements and interests

(Latonero & Kift, 2018; Seuferling & Leurs, 2021). The digitalization of migration governance has led to the datafication and automation of processes, which have become the basis for improving or replacing human decision-making through overlapping developments, including artificial intelligence, machine learning, and predictive analytics (Leurs & Witteborn, 2021, p. 18). In short, the same digitalization that affects migration can promote the inclusion or exclusion of migrants, depending on the logic, purposes, and, above all, the context. While connected migrants can more easily integrate and feel included in society through their media practices, digitalization already helps to recognize desirable migrants and exclude undesirable ones at the borders. As Lévi-Strauss (1966) stated, human beings are classifier animals, and this classificatory logic, which is already in their nature, is now implemented by technologies, AI, platforms, and datafication, which divide and classify in order to exclude. Borders are no longer only geographical (Freedman et al., 2023), but also digital. They are intertwined with policies and technologies and embedded in architectural infrastructures. They are considered an expansive system of practices and digitalized discourses, infrastructures. Therefore, it is important to recognize that there are territorial and symbolic borders, which cannot be completely differentiated because borders are ubiquitous orders of regulation and care or conditional inclusion (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2022). The border has become a volume that can expand and contract and change, shaped by philosophical, political, topological, and cultural forces (Gržinić, 2018) and through technologies. Borders can undergo a horizontal expansion depending on agreements between countries, and a vertical one thanks to surveillance and the technology that not only manages it but also creates it. The digitalization of migration has led every stage of migration to become digital (IOM, 2024). Before leaving, migrants inform themselves online (although not exclusively; social contacts are still considered fundamental) by accessing information services for migration. When they arrive in the country, they are confronted with online application processes and use the different digital platforms to stay in touch, make new contacts, look for work, access the health system, improve their language skills and knowledge of the area, manage digital money if they have come for work, and take care of those left behind. Even if they do not stay in the new country, either by choice or by force, the processes of returning and integrating also take place online. Digitalization of migration requires digitalization of migrants.

### *2.2. On Digital Migrants*

As seen in the previous section, migration as a phenomenon and experience is now completely digitalized. According to Leurs (2023, p. 6), "migration does not exist outside technological development, is not developed outside the social-cultural and political domain of migration," which means that migration and technology must be considered ontologically inseparable. McAuliffe (2016) speaks of the "applification" of migration, highlighting how new technologies are applied at various stages of the journey and in the stay in the new country, and how this can empower individuals (Abujarour et al., 2021; Bauloz, 2021). Smartphones, apps, and charging ports and connections are considered as important as food and healthcare (Latonero et al., 2018). The evolution of the media system has brought important repercussions also for the transnational lives of migrants (Licoppe & Smoreda, 2004; Wilding, 2006). Connected migrants (Diminescu, 2008) can maintain relationships from their pre-migration life and continue to participate in both societies, forming digital diasporas (Ponzanesi, 2020; Tsagarousianou, 2020). They are, or should be, physically part of the society in which they live, but, at the same time, continue to be, digitally, part of the society to which they belonged before migrating. In this sense, migrants are transnational, hybrid, digital beings. The revolutionary scope of digitalization is also visible in the personal and private sphere. The advent of email is often identified as a turning point by migration studies (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Wilding, 2006). Although email

communication is more detached, it has enhanced the quantitative aspect of contacts. The smartphone, as previously mentioned, and the possibility of making cheap calls, and using apps such as WhatsApp to send messages or initiate video calls, can be considered an even greater revolution on the emotional side. In this sense, terms and concepts such as "e-family" (Benítez, 2012) have become widespread in the literature to describe this new way of staying in touch and/or "doing family" (Morgan, 1996). Digitalization has also revolutionized the experience of living in the host country, in a process of inclusion that, while not entirely guaranteed by media practices, is at least facilitated by them. Digital technology has become an integral part not only of migrants' transnational lives, but also of the various educational, health, and work systems on which society is based (Adkins & Sandy, 2020; O'Mara et al., 2021), to which migrants need access. Media are also used to learn about the "new" country, its cultures and customs (Kaufmann, 2018), but also on a more geographical level to better orient oneself in space (Kim & Lingel, 2015). They are also often used to learn a new language, through YouTube videos or similar apps, as well as to search for job advertisements or information of a legal nature or concerning the most basic needs, such as healthcare (Gillespie et al., 2018). Alencar (2020) refers to this as the reterritorialization of people (and places), which allows people to regain a sense of continuity that makes it possible to continue one's life even if in a totally different way than before and in different places. This article finds its place in the investigation of those situations in which migrants lose their digital connotation, such as in detention, which has repercussions for the reterritorialization mentioned by Alencar, and for private and non-private transnational relationships.

## 3. Research Methods and Context

### *3.1. Research Context*

In Sweden, as well as in many other European and western countries, detention is increasingly being used to manage migration. There are currently seven detention centres in Sweden, concentrated in the south of the country where the major cities are located. However, there are plans to increase capacity and distribute centres more evenly across the country. The Migrationsverket, the Swedish Migration Agency, is the authority that runs the detention centres and considers applications from people who want to live in Sweden. In the specific case this article deals with, the Migrationsverket can decide on refugee status, subsidiary protection, and humanitarian protection and rejection. In the latter case, if the person decides not to cooperate with voluntary return, the authority can decide on detention. People can be detained if they are awaiting identification or registration of their asylum application, if they are illegally present in the country, if they are at risk of disappearing, if they have committed a crime or are at risk of committing a crime, or if they have lost their right to remain in the country for any reason, including if they have lost their job (Ankerstedt, 2005). Depending on the reasons, the detention decision may be valid for different periods, but it should not exceed 12 months, as stated by the Court of Justice of the European Union (C-146/14 PPU—Mahdi). Outward movement is forbidden; detainees cannot leave the centres, but they have freedom of movement inside, albeit controlled. As previously described, access to media is limited and controlled. When migrants are taken into custody, their smartphones are confiscated, and they are given a dumb phone, a phone without a camera or internet access, upon arrival at the centre. However, internet access is guaranteed through computers in common rooms, which must be booked in advance. The research context is therefore extremely interesting, as successful digitalization invests in the spaces and processes that precede detention and helps to determine it. However, a counter-digitalization can be observed when it comes to the migrants, which contributes to a movement of exclusion that has already begun outside.

### *3.2. Research Methods*

The data in this article are taken from an ethnographic study (Miranda, 2022) conducted between 2022 and 2024 in Sweden. In May 2022, this research project was approved by the Swedish Ethics Review Authority (Etikprövningsmyndigheten) and I was able to conduct ethnographic interviews (Heyl, 2001; Wetherell, 2003) with migrants currently detained, as well as with former detainees who had been released or repatriated. The Migration Agency granted me permission to interview the detainees, but not to spend time with them in the facilities. This prompted me to conduct in-depth ethnographic interviews, enabling me to conduct research within the centres while remaining outside them, through the stories and descriptions provided by the migrants I interviewed. Participants were recruited spontaneously, according to the well-known snowball effect. After conducting the first interview with a former detainee, he put me in touch with a couple more people: one who had already been repatriated and another who was still detained. In this way, I managed to create my small network of contacts, which was expanding every day after a new interview, and which also helped me from the point of view of building trust (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2020). During the fieldwork, I met 21 people, many of whom I met more than once, and collected a total of 63 interviews. Inside the centres, the interviews took place in the visiting room and for a maximum of one hour each time. Outside, with no time limit, I let my participants choose the location if they were still in Sweden; otherwise, I conducted the interviews on Zoom. The interviews were not recorded, mainly because I was not allowed to do so inside the centres, and I decided not to record the interviews outside either, so as not to further alter two already different situations. However, I kept an ethnographic diary in which I jotted down words and brief notes during the conversations. As soon as the interview was over, I enriched these notes with all the words participants had said, my impressions, and the silences regarding certain aspects, to obtain a reconstruction of our conversations that was as accurate as possible. I approached my notes following an inductive process typical of the constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). This involved following the interviews with data discussion and review sessions, which generated new field research questions, in a cyclic, iterative process. I chose to write using ethnographic vignettes (Bloom-Christen & Grunow, 2022; Demetriou, 2023) that recount real situations but not exactly as they happened, in order to protect the privacy and security of my participants. Although there are no direct quotations or interview excerpts in the text, I believe that the vignettes lend it greater ethnographic weight. For the same reasons of anonymity and protection, the protagonists of the vignettes are also fictitious, constructed as an aggregation of different profiles encountered during the fieldwork. In the following sections, I will use ethnographic vignettes (Vignettes 1–6). These are written in a narrative style and open reflections on research.

## 4. The Return of *Old* Media Practices

**Vignette 1**. We were only migrants.

> The kitchen can only be accessed by the staff who take care of everyone's meals. It is not the act of cooking that was missing, but of feeling at home. Also, not being able to move around, watch what you want on television without having to share it with 15 other people, play musical instruments, reading, scrolling through Facebook's home page, watching videos on YouTube, having a curiosity and not being able to prove it on Google. Many of them spoke of feeling distant from people outside the centres, not only from family or friends, but also from those they did not know. Everyone, as if there

> was no longer a common, shared experience of reality. "We were migrants, detained migrants, *not people like everyone else*."

The most frequent finding from the interviews I conducted was a sense of detachment from the rest of society, which was gradually explained as a lack of access to what the rest of society has. There are several media and non-media, online and offline practices that detention makes impossible. For the migrants I interviewed, this deprivation takes on a very specific meaning, as exemplified by the quote in the vignette. It is not just about having one's own smartphone, and internet access, or being able to cook, not even just to spend time that otherwise passes slowly in detention; rather, my participants explained that they were deprived of all those daily practices and gestures that, outside, for the rest of people, are common. The ban on the use of certain media, such as smartphones, as well as time limits imposed on computer use, which are insufficient to meet the needs of everyone in a centre and must be booked in advance, led me to focus on other forms of media returning to detention and the meanings associated with them. Notably, these include dumb phones and paper-based communication, with which many of my interviewees were no longer familiar or had never been familiar. In this sense, I was able to observe not only the meanings and effects of this return, but also the profound process of readjustment to them.

### *4.1. Return to the Dumb Phone*

**Vignette 2.** The tiny screen.

> Now where do I insert my sim card? In the side there is nothing, ah, maybe in the back, the back cover can be removed and yes there is a space for the sim card, next to the battery. But the phone's slot for the sim card is bigger than the sim itself, the phone came with the adapter. Now I can turn it on, how do I turn it on? A bigger button in the middle, right? Yes, that's it, now it turns on. It takes some time. Finally. Oh, what a tiny screen!

Migrants are given traditional mobile phones once they arrive at the designated detention centre. As these phones are owned by the centres, which means they can only be used within the facility. If migrants are transferred to a different centre, or if they are picked up for deportation, they must hand them back and wait until they arrive at the new centre to receive another one or to get their own smartphone back at the airport. There may also be a delay of a couple of days between the time of the custody and arrival at the centre, during which migrants are isolated because they have already handed over their smartphones and have not yet received their new ones. Once they arrive at the centre and have completed the registration interview, staff give them a short tour of the facility and accompany them to their rooms, where they will receive a plastic bag containing some of their personal belongings and a pillow. It is at this point that they also receive their "new" phone, along with their SIM card and adapter. My participants described switching on this new phone as a special, almost mystical moment. For some of them, it was the first time, so they had to ask someone who already used one or try several times, while others, like the protagonist of this vignette, had to reacquaint themselves with gestures they had forgotten after such a long time. The phone comes with its own charger and a SIM card adapter. In Swedish detention centres, detainees keep their own SIM card, so they keep their phone number and continue to take care of the monthly subscription payment, which they are forced to change. Outside the centres, the general choice is to have unlimited internet by giving up the offers concerning calls and messages. Internet, however, here in detention is useless, because they can only

make calls, send texts, or play Snake. However, communication, especially with those who are far away, takes on a completely different form. Some of the detained migrants I interviewed compared this to how things were at least 15 years ago, when they first left home. Back then, it was not so easy to stay in touch. Often, a day and time would be agreed upon to talk to one's family, who might not have a telephone or an internet connection, meaning they would have to travel to make contact. Today, in detention, the situation is similar, yet the opposite. It is no longer the family left behind who face the greatest difficulties in making contact, but rather the migrants in Sweden. One of my participants always booked the computer for the Tuesday slot from 15 to 16. This was when he could make a video call on Zoom with his brother, who lived in Senegal. A regular phone call using the dumb phone provided by the Migration Agency was too expensive for either him or his brother. Others, however, used dumb phone communication as an emergency channel. However, there are emergencies for which a quick text message is not enough. The day after the tragic earthquake that struck Turkey in February 2023, I had a couple of interviews scheduled at one of the centres I visit most often, just outside Stockholm. On that occasion, the limitations of dumb phones became extremely apparent. There was no internet access to check the situation or read the latest news and updates on what was happening in one's own country or to loved ones. This issue was "resolved" with the help of other detained migrants: in the following days, a computer was made available for checking the news, and a television was tuned to a Turkish news channel. However, communication with those who were there was also difficult, so a more creative solution was found.

**Vignette 3**. The earthquake.

> I have a friend outside who was detained here with me until a month ago. He is also Turkish. The day of the earthquake, he called me immediately and said he would help me. I still hadn't been able to contact my family; they weren't answering. I gave him my brother's number, he contacted him on WhatsApp, and shortly afterwards he joined my family's WhatsApp group. For the next three days, I sent him text messages, which he copied and pasted into my family's chat. Then, whenever a reply came, he forwarded it to me. I was in the WhatsApp chat without having access to WhatsApp.

Migrants placed in detention lose their hybrid status of being digitally connected and transnational. However, as in the case just described, they try to find alternative ways to continue being so. Detained migrants may have access to the internet via computers in common rooms to be shared with others, but the number of computers in a detention centre varies according to its size and the number of people accommodated. In general, there are never enough to cover the demand and, for this reason, those who want to use the computers must reserve a time slot in advance.

**Vignette 4.** Surveilled routine.

> Finally, my computer hour. I sit down, turn it on, immediately open the internet. I have so many things to do. Today I have a video call on Zoom with my sister in 18 minutes. I start checking everything, as always. I type into Google the two pages I usually read to inform myself, then I also open Twitter and start checking. I jump from one tweet to another, I type in Google, I go back to Twitter, I open Facebook too. So many things have happened since the other day! I have to do something; the situation is really falling apart. I start to write a tweet too, but I stop immediately, and I close everything. There are too many surveillance cameras in the room, I do not want them [the people from the Migration Agency] to see what I write or think. Ok, now I will call my sister, she will be ready.

While the computer itself cannot be considered an old technology, it becomes one when it is the only means of accessing the internet. It is used to stay connected to the outside world and communicate, as people did before smartphones became widely available. In many cases, therefore, the hour of internet access is also the only time one has access to information, the only time one can find out what is happening and participate more actively. Furthermore, the vignette also illustrates another aspect that I refer to as a self-censorship practice. In detention, the level of privacy when using a computer or accessing the internet is almost zero. Media practices are shared, observed, heard, recorded: Detainees fear that these online activities may be used against them. Consequently, they decide to self-censor, breaking those relationships with their country and their participation in the public scene. This results in a sense of detachment and exclusion from the outside world, and from what was previously their own space and society.

### *4.2. Return to the Paper*

Sweden is recognized as a leader in digital innovation and a high-tech country when it comes to bureaucracy. Everything can be accessed with a quick and easy click, making everything fast as long as you possess a personnummer (the Swedish personal identity number) and a Bank ID (the electronic identification system). To obtain a personnummer and BankID, you must have the right to reside in the country and open a bank account. Migrants, especially those in detention, obviously do not fall into this category. For those without a personnummer or BankID, the way the country functions is completely different, and they are automatically cut off from certain mechanisms of society. For this reason, migrants in facilities, for example, have contact with the bureaucracy through paper letters. The return to paper in the centres is explained as indispensable, as it is the only way to maintain official communication. Although the Swedish Migration Agency has decided to print its documents on both sides of a sheet of paper—a sign of awareness of the difficulty of obtaining paper and of the associated costs—as well as being a more environmentally friendly choice, paper continues to be used as a bureaucratic tool in the context of detention. Official letters informing detained migrants of decisions taken regarding their applications and other communications from the Migration Agency, for example, relating to travel or arranging appointments and interviews with staff, are addressed to individuals in detention centres and delivered in physical paper format (see Vignette 5).

**Vignette 5.** Receiving a letter.

> I had been waiting for this letter for at least two weeks. It arrived, I opened it, it was in Swedish. I know Swedish, but this was a different kind of Swedish. I didn't know what some of the words meant, and even after translating it on the internet, when I finally got the computer, I still didn't understand. I had to wait until I had a meeting with my solicitor, who explained it better to me. I could have asked the staff in the centre, but I don't trust them.

As the vignette shows, official communications are often written in Swedish and sometimes use terms that make them difficult to be understood, even if one knows the language. This issue can be more easily resolved outside the centres, where migrants have access to various aids, including technological ones, and several translators. However, inside the centres, migrants have to wait not only for the letter to arrive, but also to understand its meaning. This is the main issue associated with paper-based bureaucracy: not only waiting but also exacerbating an already complicated situation. During the research, however, I observed that the return to paper can be experienced in different ways and take on different meanings (see Vignette 6).

**Vignette 6.** Writing a letter.

> Aram is in his room, lying in bed with a piece of paper and a pen; he is trying to write to his partner. He can't even remember how to write letters anymore, but he starts anyway, telling him what he did today, and yesterday, after their weekly video call. Then he crumples up the paper and takes another one from the bedside table. He doesn't have much to tell, he hasn't done much, why write a letter telling nothing? But at the same time, he really wants to write him, a video call is not enough. He begins to remember when they met, got married, all that was before the detention, and then all that would be after, outside again, no reference to what he is today, now, in that centre.

The letter can become another means of communication, differentiating the technologies used for communicating with whom and for what purpose. Of course, there is an added wait for that letter as well, but it is a kind of waiting that brings happiness and helps to maintain the romanticism that that situation hindered and that returning to paper and waiting for those words could bring back. It is therefore very interesting to note that there is also a dual role attributed to paper. In this case, paper restores the intimacy denied by detention, proving that it is not the media itself that needs to be considered, but rather the role, the context, and by whom it is used.

## 5. Counter Digitalization and Exclusion

Mimi Sheller, talking about the different functions of the smartphone for migrants, states: "From banal everyday object, iPhones and Samsungs emerge suggestively as lifeline, ticket, identification, meeting point, fetish object, gift exchange" (Sheller, 2016, p. 7). As already discussed in the previous section, it is difficult for a dumb phone to replace a smartphone, and it is almost impossible for it to fulfil all the roles it was intended for. The same applies to paper, which cannot match the speed and efficiency of email, but can create scenarios for a different kind of communication, slower but also more intimate. What this research has highlighted, among other things, is that the return of old media practices requires individuals to also make an emotional effort to adopt and adapt to them. In both cases, it is a matter of re-familiarization. Not knowing how to use an old model of phone or how to start writing a letter are perfect examples of this and that of a movement of digitalization that goes in the opposite direction to the one outside, presenting itself as a counter-digitalization that immediately takes the form of exclusion. In a fully digitalized society, for example, having to wait for a letter to arrive and be delivered, and then wait again for someone to explain what it says or what it means, also means being excluded from the normal functioning of the rest of the country. The case of the earthquake in Turkey is an example of what has just been said. Although it can be interpreted as an expression of the agency of detained migrants who manage to find alternative solutions to the limitations imposed by detention, it is not a form of communication that can be considered characteristic of a highly digitalized system, such as the one in which migrants find themselves. The vignettes presented in the previous section show an almost constant feeling of exclusion from the outside world, a distance that is not only from one's family and loved ones, nor only from one's country of origin, but a wider and deeper distance from other people, from external reality, and from society. This feeling is amplified by the constant sense of delay experienced by migrants in detention (Jacobsen et al., 2021). The result is a kind of temporal split between what is the real time *outside* and what is the time *inside*. The lack of connection with outside reality means that events outside the centres arrive late to those inside, as discussed above regarding the earthquake in Turkey. This naturally prevents participation in such events. In this sense, I argue that detained

migrants are the opposite of the digital migrants, who manage to demonstrate their presence even when they are not physically present. In detention, what is lacking is the "coincidence in time and proximity in space" (Lawrence, 1981, as cited in Huang, 2012, p. 592) that cannot even be digitally. Events inside and outside do not happen simultaneously. The disjunction between time outside and time inside, the recognition of two presents, the different speeds, the difficulty in participating in both, even if one wants to, speaks of a simultaneity that detention, as space and system, interrupts. Anderson recognizes simultaneity as that homogeneity and temporal coincidence, and the necessary condition that helps to imagine a community (Anderson, 1991, p. 26). In this imagination of community through simultaneity, media are those tools that make you feel part of something. Consequently, if this simultaneity is broken, the detained migrant is excluded from the imagined community, from society. I argue that detention results in the exclusion of individuals on several fronts. First, and perhaps most explicitly, there is an exclusion from the country: Migrants, also due to fully digitalized borders, are registered, controlled, and classified. If considered undesirable, they are excluded from the reception system and detained for repatriation. The other is the exclusion from digitalization, which takes place in detention centres. The same digitalization process that has completely invested the management of migration and detention, as well as the infrastructures that precede it, at the same time denies migrants access to it. In this sense, this article shows the need to critically discuss the movement of counter-digitalization. Exclusion from digitalization also leads to exclusion from society. Detained migrants are not even equipped with the means and tools needed today to actively participate in public discourse in both the host and the home country. This critical situation of limited internet access and, therefore, limited participation also affects those whom Migrationsverket has opted to repatriate. In some cases, these are people who no longer have ties to the country they left and to which they will have to return. This means that some kind of preparation is also necessary before forced return, for example, looking for job offers or accommodation. Just as digital assistance is fundamental to settling in a new country, so too is it fundamental to what we might call resettlement. However, these practices cannot be implemented, or are extremely limited, to computer-booking slots. In this sense, there is a double exclusion once again: not only from the host society that is sending them away, but also from the society to which they will be sent back. Not having access to digitalization gives people the feeling of exclusion. Tazzioli refers to this as "digital expulsions" when she discusses the digitalization of the asylum system and media technologies that have the role of intermediary between asylum seekers and institutions, are instead used to hinder participation and access to financial and humanitarian support (Tazzioli, 2023, p. 1302). The same situation arises in both societies. Detention delays information about what is happening outside, and about decisions affecting their lives. This uncertainty increases a sense of confusion and vulnerability. Therefore, while we are witnessing a rapid and widespread digitalization of spaces, we can also observe a kind of counter-digitalization among the individuals inhabiting those same spaces. In this sense, I would argue that digitalization follows different speeds and directions, depending on the power exercised through it and its purposes. Detained migrants go back to being un-digital, to playing Snake, to call, but only those who can afford it, as the only way to communicate, to access the internet through computers in a determinate set of time. In contrast, the system that manages and controls them is composed of highly sophisticated technologies capable of collecting biometric data to be shared with infrastructures outside these spaces and cross-referencing them through algorithms to create certain profiles. This is a counter-digitalization within a very highly digitalized system, where the presence and absence of technology take on meanings and roles that I referred to as political in the introduction. Heidegger believed that technology is a way of relating to reality and thus plays a fundamental role in how individuals view the world (Heidegger, 2008, p. 311). Is this the key to understanding the role of technologies in detention and counter-digitalization? Technology is often

emphasized as a way of relating to reality, which is peculiar to migrants who use it. However, what emerges from the discussion is that the same can be recognized even within the detention system, and in this sense, it is a "technologically framed venture" (Backman, 2024, p. 18). I argue that it is a system that works precisely because of the way it employs its own technologies or makes only some of them available. This creates a precise vision of reality, which is the one in which detained migrants live, and which is characterized by waiting, deportability, and a time lag that doubles time by actively interrupting simultaneity, resulting in exclusion. This new restricted, limited, and controlled landscape is the result of a conscious choice by the authorities and excludes individuals from the digitalization that has affected all other spheres of society.

## 6. Conclusion

Migration, as also emerges from the literature review, has become one of the symbols of digitalization, in terms of both the experience of the individuals and how different countries, authorities, or even humanitarian organizations manage it. There has been a total digitalization of the infrastructures that revolve around migration and reception: Asylum applications, rather than access to economic support or services such as healthcare, are now entirely digital, requiring migrants to become mediatized and digital individuals. Migration management depends on different technologies, such as surveillance technologies and biometric recognition systems, that identify individuals by cross-referencing their biological and behavioural characteristics with data acquired through databases and algorithms (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2020; Madianou, 2019). Detention management is among them. The choice of detention, for example, is also made through the surveillance and tracking of individuals and the cross-referencing of data from different parts of Europe (Walters, 2002). This establishes risk profiles to determine whether a migrant can be accepted. However, in this highly digitalized and technological landscape, it is possible to note some contradictions in terms of digitalization and inclusion, which this article aims to highlight. Fieldwork and the vignettes revealed that while migration management can rely on technological assistance, the same cannot be said for migrants themselves. The media technologies intended for use by migrants are, in fact, limited and controlled. This creates a less intimate and spontaneous way of connecting with the outside world, resulting in a feeling of vulnerability and exclusion from society. In this sense, the high-tech digitalization comes to a halt when migrants themselves use and access it, rather than institutions. Yet, there is a return to old forms of media and old ways of connecting with reality and maintaining relationships, which characterizes the everyday life of the centres, due to the delayed arrival of information about what is happening outside. Even letters arrive late and are already outdated by the time they arrive. Therefore, I have argued that it is difficult to participate in and feel included in societies and relationships in this kind of media environment, and so detained migrants feel excluded from everything they were part of before their detention. This is a theme that has already been addressed in other studies and emerges explicitly in detention. According to Helsper (2021), the lack of access is the most basic form of digital disconnection, and according to Byrne (2005), inequalities in digitalization shape the normative evaluation of civic engagement. This means that people who lack the necessary resources, or who have them taken away, as in the case of my interviewees, tend not to have the opportunity to participate actively in a community. Following Bossert and other colleagues, I state that social exclusion is also manifested by an individual's relative and persistent lack of access, resulting in a state of deprivation over time (Bossert et al., 2007). If digitalization does not guarantee inclusion, but merely facilitates it, asking migrants to no longer be digital beings becomes synonymous with exclusion. The earthquake case makes it quite clear: While families were isolated because everything around them was falling apart, detained migrants were isolated simply because they were detained.

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## Data Availability

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## About the Author

Miriana Cascone is a PhD candidate in media and communication studies at Södertörn University, Sweden. In her project, she explores the role of technology in migrant detention centres. Her research interests include migration, media interaction, biometric and surveillance technologies, and transnationalism.