

# Transnational Spaces and Scopic Media: Social Realities in Change

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## Abstract

*The term “transnational spaces” is linked to the concept of “transnational social spaces” (Pries 1998). It is understood as new cross-border interconnections that represent a reference structure for life practices and self-concepts. Transnational spaces have economic, ecological, political, socio-cultural dimensions. This lecture focuses primarily on the socio-cultural dimensions in the context of migration movements. It will explore the role of media in organizing and shaping transnational socio-cultural spaces. Migrants are producers of transnational spaces; they make use of scopic media, which turn out to be instruments, places and products of moving affiliations.*

*Scopic media are capable of coupling, combining, and augmenting geographically distant situations, thereby opening up spaces of observation and information as new realities (Knorr Cetina/Reichmann/Woermann 2017). This happens, for example, when migrants exchange images with those left behind in the country of origin via WhatsApp, through which distant realities are projected into the reality of the host country and become effective there (Hepp/Bozdog/Sana 2011).*

*Scopic media do not merely depict situations; they intervene. They visualize what is not visible, they detach the observation of others from the physical context, they change the understanding of presence, they establish a new type of interaction and thus promote the transformation of sociality.*

*The paper is based on the study “Transnational Lifestyles in the Sign of Media Orientations and Practices”. As part of this study, 36 interviews were conducted with people of different genders, ranging in age from their early 20s to about 50. They immigrated to German-speaking countries (Austria and Germany) from various European, African and Arab regions and have medium- to long-term life and work perspectives in their respective host countries. In addition to the concepts of “transnational spaces” and “transtoppas” (Yildiz 2015), the concept of “scopic media” will be used as explanatory approaches in the paper.*

**Keywords:** *Scopic media, Transnational spaces, migrants*

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29-year-old Elena, who has been living and working in Germany for 3 years, drew the following picture. It is her answer to the question: "I come from Belarus and live in Germany. Who am I?" Elena sees her home in both her country of migration and her country of origin. Her feet point in both directions. "I wanted to show that I am in between, between cultures," she explains. She rejects a clear positioning. Elena took part in the study "Transnational Lifestyles and Media", which included 36 women and men who immigrated to German-speaking countries from African, Arab and European countries and have medium- to long-term living and working perspectives in the country of migration.<sup>1</sup>

In her picture, Elena creates a transnational socio-cultural space, which describes interconnections that form a new reference structure for life practices, biographical projects and self-concepts that transcend national societies (Pries 1998, p.75). They result from coexistence, inter- and counter-connection of cross-border movements. In terms of world history, cross-border mobility is not new; what has changed is the acceleration of this mobility, its intensity and its worldwide visibility.



*Abb.1: I wanted to show that I am in between" (Elena, 29, Belarus)*



*Abb.2: Schachtner, Christina (2022): Global Age, Migration und Medien, Bielefeld: transcript*

Media are an indispensable factor for the interweaving of different socio-cultural spaces. They provide the infrastructure for cross-border interactions and they prove to be instruments with whose support subjects become actors in transnational spaces (Römhild 2011, p.21). Karin Knorr Cetina et al. have introduced the concept of scopic media to examine global digitally supported communication spaces. The term scopic media refers to visual synthetic realities; I also want to include other global synthetic media like music that create synthetic realities. The following questions will be explored in this text:

- What are scopic and other synthetic media in the context of migration?
- What do they enable and how do they shape the media actions of migrants?
- How do social forms change under the influence of global medial practices?

### **1. Synthetic media and the transnational**

Synthetic media couple distant situations, they summarise, enrich them and thereby open up new spaces of information and observation (Knorr Cetina et al. 2017, p.38). They project distant states and events into new situations and allow them to become effective in them (ibid.).

An example of the effect of media content in other cultural contexts are the pictures that Alexandra, a Greek migrant, sent from her new workplace, a forest kindergarten, to her family in Greece via Whatsapp. With media support, she opened up her workplace to her family's interpretations. The pictures of the forest kindergarten, transported into the context of a Greek

family, triggered astonishment and rejection. The migrant says: “For my Greek family it is not normal that I work in the forest (...). They think I’m crazy”.

Crucial elements of synthetic realities are computer screens (Knorr 2012, 178), which offer a wide range of possibilities for observation, listening and interaction. On the computer screens, realities from different cultural life worlds merge into a synthesis.

## **2. Structural characteristics of synthetic medial practices by migrants**

In the following, I will try to work out how synthetic medial practices are concretised, how forms and contents of communication change under the sign of transnational syntheses and what new experiences are associated with it. Examples from the above-mentioned study will be used as illustrations.

### **- Making the distant audible and visible**

Synthetic medial practices by migrants are directed at making distant invisible and inaudible phenomena situationally present (Knorr Cetina 2012:168). Information and communication flows from the country of migration to the country of origin and vice versa, as well as to other parts of the world in the case of dispersed family and friends. The distant becomes effective in words, images and sound in one’s own life world; it relates to everyday routines, to family life and to politics.

Global synthetic media support the tendency to dissolve the world not only into words but increasingly into images (Wulf 2006, p. 42). But music also plays an important role in the lives of migrants as a synthetic medium. Elena brought Russian music with her from her country of origin,



*Fig.3: The grandparents' house in the country of origin and the mountains in the country of migration merge into a synthesis in Daria's head (Daria, 44, Romania)*

which she listens to on the way to work in the underground train in her country of migration. Amar listens to Kora music, an African music style, as soon as he is in his car.

The far away meets differing life worlds where it arrives, which are set in relation to the media transports. Listening to Russian music in a German underground train presumably changes one's view of one's immediate surroundings. Kora music in the ear while driving a car possibly leads to the passing physical landscape being superimposed by a mental landscape of dreams. The superimposition of sentences, images, sounds from different spatial-cultural contexts points to a multiple life that produces moving affiliations.

**- Presence in the context of media syntheses**

Global synthetic media provide an immaterial presence of the distant. How do migrants relate to this kind of presence? It emerges from the interviews that they prefer those media syntheses Global synthetic media support the tendency to dissolve the world not only into words but increasingly into images (Wulf 2006, p. 42). But music also plays an important role in the lives of migrants as a synthetic medium. Elena brought Russian music with her from her country of origin, which she listens to on the way to work in the underground train in her country of migration. Amar listens to Kora music, an African music style, as soon as he is in his car. The far away meets differing life worlds where it arrives, which are set in relation to the media transports. Listening to Russian music in a German underground train presumably changes one's view of one's immediate surroundings. Kora music in the ear while driving a car possibly leads to the passing physical landscape being superimposed by a mental landscape of dreams. The superimposition of sentences, images, sounds from different spatial-cultural contexts points to a multiple life that produces moving affiliations.

**- Presence in the context of media syntheses**

Global synthetic media provide an immaterial presence of the distant. How do migrants relate to this kind of presence? It emerges from the interviews that they prefer those media applications that come as close as possible to face-to-face presence, i.e. that appeal to the senses, especially the sense of sight and hearing. For a Spanish migrant, Skype has the advantage that "you (hear) the voice and usually also see the face". An Iranian migrant explicitly advocates "talking with faces". "We have to look at each other. With sight is much more better," she adds.

And yet: it remains an image, a transmitted voice, even when transmitted in real time. It is not the events themselves that are experienced, but only what is transported by the media (Wulf 2006, p.140). This form of presence is addressed in the interviews. Meeting friends online was "almost like sitting together" explains a migrant who immigrated from Italy and adds:

"It's like talking, but abbreviated". For one interview partner, to whom his relatives in Senegal send pictures of the Feast of Sacrifice celebrated there, these pictures mean "you celebrate a little bit with them". Ron comments the pictures, which he receives from Uganda as follows:

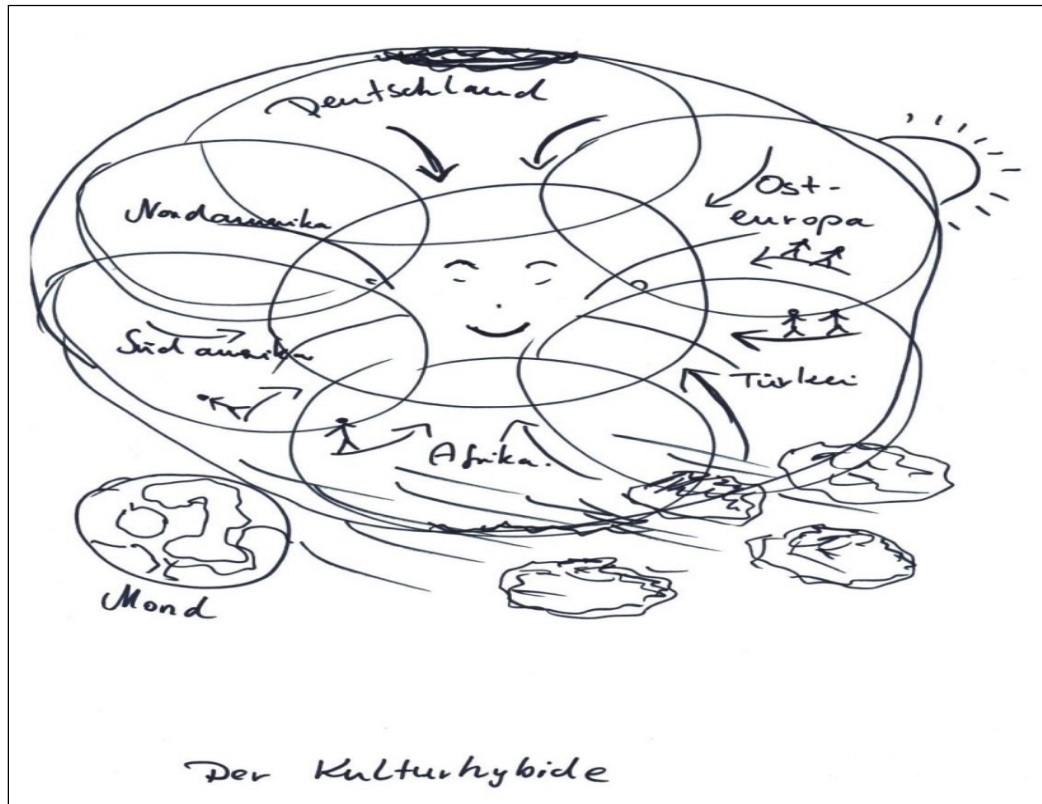


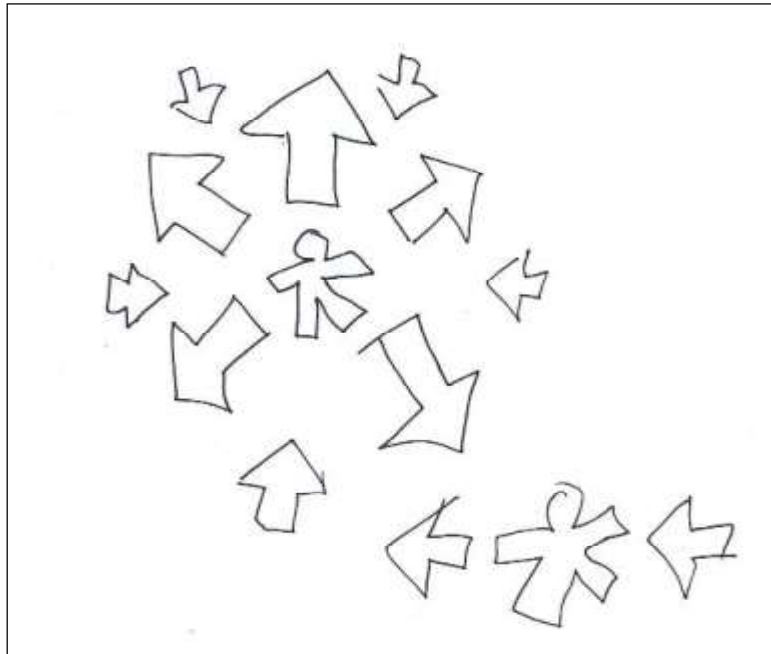
Fig.4: The "cultural hybrid" (Mateusz, 40, Poland)

"It brings the friends and the feeling of home a little bit close". It is the words "almost like", "abbreviated", "a bit" that mark the particular form of presence in the context of global synthetic media.

#### - Processes of cultural embedding and disembedding

The digitally sent images shake off their immediate physical embedding; that is, the context of the people in these pictures remains largely invisible. At the same time, the migrants try to preserve familiar spatial-cultural embeddings through images and sounds. For Arib, Gwana music is a bridge to his country of origin, Morocco. Arib plays this music in the country of migration together with rock bands or representatives of classical European music. On the one hand, this enables him to be sure of his origins and, on the other, to relate to other musical traditions. There can be a musical embedding in different cultural contexts.

Being involved in circular worlds of thought and feeling beyond national borders harbours a seed for hybrid concepts of life (Pries 1998, p.77), which do not have an either-or but an either-and-or



*Fig.5: Global online communities (Lorenzo, 51, Italy)*

as a basis for thinking and feeling (Tschernokoshewa 2005, p.24) and which allow one to draw from a multiple cultural programme (Tschernokoshewa 2015, p.68).

#### **- Linking different space and time zones**

Global synthetic media project contexts that are beyond the reach of the immediate lifeworld; they transmit a global world of different time zones (Knorr Cetina 2012, p.170). Another way in which time zones are intertwined is when musical styles from different time periods are mixed, as practised by Arib, who mixes Gwana music with rock music or with the music of Franz Schubert, resulting in a new type of music. Sometimes, however, the interweaving of spatial zones is in the foreground, for example when Malika tells us that during a visit of her Moroccan family in the country of migration, all the places visited there were photographed and the pictures sent to Morocco, often 20 - 40 pictures per day. An intertwining of space and time zones takes place in online discussion groups, in which more and more friends who live in different countries click in within a certain period of time. They are connected in a community of time (Knorr Cetina 2012, p.187) and at the same time they mutually transmit images of events important to them in different places. Thus a new geography of places is created.

What does it mean to be in the hub of different space and time zones? The interweaving of space and time zones expands the sensual experience, it provokes comparison; it can question previous certainties and call for repositioning. The simultaneous presence of different spaces and times can also overwhelm migrants. This is made clear by the Syrian author and migrant Rania Mleihi when she writes: "Not always thinking a thousand thoughts in parallel and being in a thousand

places at once. I was tired and exhausted and couldn't concentrate on anything" (Mleihi 2018, p.16).

### **3. New social realities**

Media practices create social realities. What realities are created by global synthetic media?

#### **3.1 Media-produced social forms**

The following example shows how Rogers, a migrant from Uganda, wants to influence misconceptions of a social real in the country of migration. Rogers does not send pictures of big cars to Uganda, which is met with incomprehension. "Ah Rogers, you are in Europe. Why don't you have a car?" his Ugandan friends ask him. Rogers counters: "I can't buy a car. If you want to see my car, this is my car". And he sends a picture of his scooter. Rogers wants to disillusion; he wants to dismantle an image his Ugandan friends have of the migration country.

Another example of media-produced synthetic socialities: When I ask a Syrian migrant in an interview what she communicates about with her parents in Damascus, she says: "99% are jokes" and adds: "We ignore the big fact". The big fact was the current war in Syria; it is turned into a joke when it is said that one generates electricity with the car battery "and hahaha, we don't have a car anymore". Through Humour reality is stripped of its threat. A kind of normality is generated on the basis of which plans can be made that allow hope.

The fading out of unpleasant and threatening realities is not uncommon in transnational communication contexts. It refers to the phenomenon, which is called "pragmatics of silence" in order to remain capable of action (Beck/Beck-Gernsheim 2011, p.227).

Global digital media allow on a grand scale to transmit incomplete or controlled social realities that implicitly appeal to fantasy, to dreams and imagination and that Appadurai considers as powerful sources for an "ethics of possibility" (Appadurai 2013, p.287 ff.).

However, the social reality shaped by the media also carries the risk of alienation, which a Syrian migrant anticipates with regard to a planned meeting with her family when she says:

"Maybe I will meet people who have become strangers to me". In addition, there are the risks of manipulated realities in the political and military spheres.

#### **3.2 Transnational Families/World Families**

My interviewees give a lot of space in the interviews to the formation of social relationships. Contacts with family and friends in the country of origin or elsewhere in the world must be consciously established, otherwise they do not come about. The majority of the migrants interviewed are in regular contact with their families and friends.

In addition to bilateral contacts, digitally supported communication opportunities are established in which the entire family, including the children, is involved. Nala communicates with her Ugandan family daily in a WhatsApp group. The crucial function of this group, from her point of view, is "to know every day, we exist". Alina has set up a similar group with her family living in



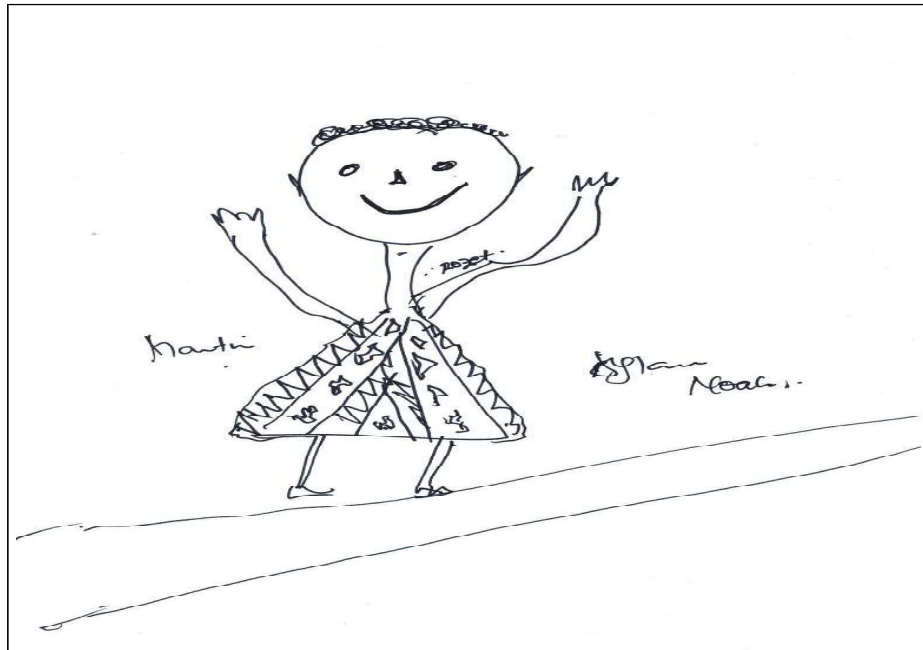


Fig. 6: In the midst of her Ugandan-Austrian family (Lila, 35, Uganda)

Bosnia through the chat service Viber. The chat group, she says, offers a substitute for on-site family meetings, which are hard to manage due to different holiday schedules.

Global synthetic media meet the desire of migrants to stay in touch with their families, to ensure cohesion. But something else is happening: families are changing. New cultural influences, e.g. through partnerships with people from other countries and cultures, lead to family communication not only across geographical but also across religious and ethnic divides (Beck/Beck-Gernsheim 2011, p.225). Differences clash that call for debate and a change of perspective. In transnational families, different lines of memory are present that demand decisions about which festivals are celebrated, which songs are sung, how and what is eaten. This results in new coordinates for socialisation and subject formation. It arises a new type of family: the world family (ibid.), situated in different parts of the world and held together by screens.

**To summarise:**

Global synthetic media function as instruments and locations for the interweaving of different socio-cultural contexts that contribute to the formation of transnational spaces. Social forms change in the interplay between technical infrastructure and the medial practices of migrants. Local forms of interaction become global forms of interaction, local families become global families. This change affects not only migrants, but migration societies as a whole, since migration has arrived at the centre of society.

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