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Smart Ellis Island? Tracing techniques of automated border governance

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Abstract

The digitalization and automation of migration governance under the buzzword "smart borders" is only the most recent instantiation of media technologies enabling state bordering. This presentation traces a history of techniques of decision-making at the border, in the case of the Ellis Island immigration station, New York City (1892–1954). Drawing on an excavation of media technologies employed at Ellis Island, this presentation demonstrates how state bordering has long been enabled by different media, engulfed with imaginaries of neutral, scientific, fair, and efficient decision-making between desired and undesired migrants – promises still central to today's "smart border" projects. Specifically, the use of "proxies" (Mulvin, 2021; Chun, 2021) for decision-making, e.g. biometric or biographic data, collected as authentic and neutral stand-ins for the migrant, can be traced back historically. By analyzing how proxies were selected, stored, and processed, by the authorities, this case study demonstrates how anxieties about public health, logics of eugenics, and ideas about scientific management formed the context for how proxies were entrusted and legitimized for binary decision-making at the border. This history demonstrates a trajectory of automated techniques of decision-making to pre-digital media technologies, revealing genealogies of proxification that still underlie contemporary border regimes and automated media technologies at large.

Biography

Philipp Seuferling is an LSE Fellow in the Department of Media and Communications at The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), United Kingdom. His research interests cover the intersections of media technologies and media practices with migration and borders, specifically from historical perspectives. For his PhD thesis, he studied media practices in refugee camps in Germany after 1945. Currently, Philipp is working on histories of border governance and critical perspectives on border digitalization and automation.