SHOT 2025 Annual Meeting

Digital Borders: Biometric Industry, Migration Databases, and Data Politics, 1950s to 2000s

From early computerization to today's AI-driven migration governance, digital databases and IT industries have long been central to managing, controlling, and shaping mobility. As states and institutions have become digital actors in monitoring and regulating migration, questions of surveillance, algorithmic oppression and social ordering have become increasingly urgent. Digital borders operate as sorting machines, they encode and potentially reinforce racialized, gendered, and sexualized forms of governance – shaping who is seen, counted, and controlled.

This panel examines the historical development of digital borders, computerized migration regimes and migration databases, the epistemologies embedded in them, and their broader socio-cultural implications and consequences. Thus, it particularly invites scholars from STS, history, sociology and anthropology to share works on border regimes, bureaucratic practices and the biometric industry.

We especially welcome contributions that explore the *actors* behind digital data infrastructures, with a particular focus on their shifting concepts and constructions of society—whether through demographic profiling, biometric categorization, or policing standards. Further, we aim to discuss how evolving *policies* and *practices* have shaped public administration both on a local and a global level – from the Cold War of the 1950s to the globalized world of the 21st century. Here, contributions are specifically welcome that examine the role of digital *infrastructures* in migration control and develop broader perspectives on how data-driven governance structures populations. Finally, we invite experimental approaches to reviving and analyzing historical database systems, considering logics of classification and exclusion.

The session invites people working around Europe and Northern America as well as Africa, Asia or the Caribbean. Focusing especially on the period between 1950 and 2000 when computers and information systems started occupying a central role in public administration and population management, the session aims to address the shift in migration policies and practices after their digitalisation, privatisation, and industrialisation.

If you are interested, please send a proposal to homberg@zzf-potsdam.de and passantic@gmail.com by 23 March 2025, including a 150-word abstract as well as your name, title, affiliation, and e-mail address.