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# Critical Perspectives of Infrastructures in the Field of Migrant Reception

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**Abstract.** This position paper discusses the convergence of literature on information infrastructures, critical theories of information and work relating to the field of reception in the context of migration. With evidence from existing literature and the preliminary findings of a pilot study based in Italy, the work of individuals and organizations within the field of migration is often filled with multi-faceted points of social support that are deeply embedded within one another. These points of social support pertain to employment, housing, food security, legal aid, language learning and so much more. Furthermore, those that are of migration background and seeking various forms of social support are entitled to the information they need in order to actively participate in their locality. Therefore, how do the systems involved in this work embody equity and inclusion? By specifically studying the information infrastructures involved in this work, one can gain perspective on the dynamic elements and practices of reception work and its reliance on technology and communication across a larger network of social support providers.

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# 1 Infrastructures and Reception in Italy

The act of Infrastructuring is a phenomenon situated in Science and Technology Studies and often associated with digital information and organization research (Bowker et al, 2010). The utility and understanding of infrastructures alone has been constructed by society over time throughout various periods of intervention (Edwards, 2017). Perhaps one of the first sociotechnical understandings of infrastructures comes from Thomas Hughes (1983) and the idea of the expansion beyond being technical artifacts and emphasis on social relations, power dynamics and institutions. This understanding derived from his work on electrical power systems and the understanding that they serve as a critical infrastructure to society at large (Hughes, 1983).

IT Infrastructures can be seen as physical entities, such as hardware and software. This definition, however, has been expanded to include a more administrative view of infrastructures that includes policies, rules, budgets and training associated with the use of the physical side of the IT infrastructure (Saga & Zmud, 1994 in Evaristo & Munkvold, 2002). Information Infrastructures in particular have been defined in a way centered on nature, development, and impact from a sociotechnical perspective. Hanseth and Monteiro (1998) argue that information infrastructure should not be perceived as a fixed technological entity but rather as a dynamic and evolving sociotechnical system. Rather, emphasis is placed on the need to move beyond a narrow focus of technology and instead consider the intricate interplay between technological components, human actors, and organizational practices. By adopting an expansive view that includes both technical and social aspects, Hanseth and Monteiro shed light on the complexities of managing and evolving information infrastructures within various organizational contexts. Hanseth and Monteiro (1998) assert that information infrastructures are often constructed incrementally, like a patchwork quilt, with various components and technologies being added over time.

Infrastructures within migration studies encompass the physical, social, and institutional frameworks that facilitate or impede the movement of people across borders. Physical infrastructures, such as transportation networks and border control systems, shape the material conditions and pathways of migration (Madianou & Miller, 2013). Social infrastructures, including migrant support networks, community organizations, and transnational social ties, play a crucial role in providing resources, information, and emotional support for migrants during their journeys and settlement processes (Faist, 2009). Understanding these infrastructures is essential for comprehending the lived experiences of migrants. Additionally, institutional infrastructures, such as immigration policies, legal frameworks, and international agreements, significantly impact migration patterns and outcomes. While public administrations implement laws and regulations, international organizations, like the International Organization of Migration (IOM),

and border agencies monitor, control, or try to prevent mobilities for not only crisis situations, but educational and professional opportunities (Lang, Pott & Shinozaki, 2021). Research within migration studies often examines how these formal structures shape the opportunities and constraints for migrants, influencing their decision-making processes and access to rights and resources (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014).

While there are many areas one can study in migration from an infrastructural perspective, my work is particularly focused on reception. Since reception looks different depending on one's local context, I further concentrate on reception in Italy. Regarding the major governmental organizations involved in the Italian reception process, one must understand the roles of SPRAR and CAS. SPRAR is the system for protection of asylum seekers and refugees, but does not host all refugees, asylum seekers and individuals with other forms of protection (Bassoli & Oggioni, 2017). CAS is the emergency solution put in place by the Ministry of the Interior in order to fulfill hosting needs when SPRAR is no longer available. CAS structures are typically large and host dozens of individuals, while the SPRAR arrangements are typically shared flats or smaller centers. Both SPRAR and CAS also occur in the second phases of the hosting system of Italy, given the initial is in government centers (Bassoli & Oggioni, 2017). There are also practices of reception that are more informal and driven in local contexts as a way to alleviate the shortcomings of the previously discussed approaches. For example, domestic hospitality is the initiative of everyday citizens in society to welcome refugees and other individuals with migration background into their homes (Boccagni & Giudici, 2021).

## 2 Previous Work in Lazio, Italy

A pilot study of the field of reception in Italy was carried out in the summer of 2021 while I interned at an organization focused on domestic hospitality practices. The findings, overall, noted a great deal of grassroots approaches to reception. Oftentimes, those involved in providing various forms of support for individuals of migration background identified with activist movements and other groups centered on equity and inclusion. This inspired curiosity pertaining to the collaboration and communication practices that takes place within and across infrastructures as well information equity practices of these groups. The pilot study findings also presented notions of creative infrastructure action, or the “resourceful, ad hoc and imaginative development of homegrown infrastructures and the work of integrating new tools into older infrastructures and cultural practices” (Jack et al., 2017, p. 6512).

### 3 Research Questions

My research questions are exploratory in nature, inspired by this 2021 pilot study as well as literature on infrastructures, reception in Italy and information equity: How can creative infrastructural action be seen across the field of reception in Italy? What happens when an infrastructure breaks? How can infrastructures embody equity and inclusion? How are infrastructures manifested through relationships and networks?

### 4 Methodological Approach

My methods are mainly ethnographic in nature, with particular focus on critical approaches to interviewing and participant observation that focus on strength based perspectives. I also see documents as a key point of departure for understanding infrastructures. A document-focused study compliments a project looking at infrastructures within the field of reception because like migration, documents are not always fixated, but rather fluid and ever-changing. Much like other forms of data gathering, documents can tell the lived experiences of individuals. The working definition of a document that I use in my work is, “Any artifact that includes substantial references to the social processes to which it was produced or reproduced” (Shankar et. al, 2016, p. 59). A document-based perspective will not only offer insight into the social processes of reception, but the political and legal as well. “Documents do more than represent the world; they often also refer to the practices, objects, rules, knowledge, and organizational forms that produced them” (Shankar et. al, 2016, p. 62).

Studying infrastructures is not an easy feat and therefore need diverse methodological approaches that offer holistic perspectives. Studying Infrastructures, or rather visualizing them, becomes possible when researchers account for both the categorical lens that considers both the construction and maintenance of systems as well as the experiences of actors involved in the infrastructure itself (Singh & Jackson, 2021). Previous epistemic approaches have been carried out to study infrastructures in a more holistic way. While previous work that directly applied theories to the study of infrastructures has made valuable contributions, there is still much to gain from inductive approaches in order to generate new theories. Therefore, studying infrastructures with a grounded theoretical approach that has an ecological design methodology allows for more greater understanding of both systems and actors. Ecological Design promotes a design methodology that values sustainability, interdisciplinary collaboration, and stakeholder participation. It aims to create information environments that not only function effectively but also contribute positively to the ecological, social, and cultural contexts in which they exist (Baker, 2004).

## 5 Expected Outcomes

By focusing on the creative action of infrastructures and how it may (or may not) embody equity and inclusion, I believe this future case study will shed light on the unseen practices of reception work in Italy. I also hope to open conversation for organizations within the field of reception to reflect upon their own infrastructures that are constantly working in the background, invisible, but crucial.

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