

## Portals, Platforms, and Other Standards of Global Communication

Juan Llamas-Rodriguez

The inside of a shipping container is dark, symmetrical, and nondescript. “A soulless aluminum or steel box held together with welds and rivets, with a wooden floor and two enormous doors at one end,” as Marc Levinson explains, “the standard container has all the romance of a tin can.”<sup>1</sup> For Levinson, the appeal of the shipping container lies not in its looks but in its central role in reorganizing the global economic geographies of the twentieth century. Still, when they are no longer fulfilling their intended role as the carriers of goods around the world, the modular interiority of shipping containers allows them to be repurposed for a variety of uses. There is, for instance, the rising popularity of shipping containers transformed into coffee shops, pools, or tiny homes. Or consider Lucy Hunter and R. Lyon’s transformation of a shipping container into *Where*, “a gallery and on-demand publishing project,” which they wrote about in *Media Fields’s* “Digital Distribution” issue.<sup>2</sup>

Given their modular and near indistinguishable interior design, shipping containers represent both an ideal and a perplexing choice as the platform for the [Shared Studios Portals](#) project, which repurposes these modular steel boxes as rooms for virtual teleconferencing. The boxes are set in popular spots across multiple cities around the world and host a few days a week of calling sessions. These sessions can be open-themed, setting up a call between two Portals in different cities and allowing anyone to drop in and say hello to a stranger elsewhere in the world. Other sessions are targeted,

bringing together similar interest groups (educational, artistic, or business) in different locations for a scheduled, coordinated interaction. The project’s promotional materials expound the team’s goals of “bringing distant strangers together using immersive technology for powerful first-person encounters.” Its mission statement covers the usual markers of a business-oriented, feel-good humanitarian project: buzzwords like “desire to connect” and “changemakers”; an acceptance of “sharing stories” as an unequivocal good; and grand pronouncements about how this project may lead to “making the world a better place.”<sup>3</sup>

The shipping container proves to be an ideal setting for the imaginary of global connectivity and social interaction that Portals promises. Like freight carrying containers, these telecom-fitted boxes make transnational movement fast and efficient. You step inside, and a few clicks later you are face-to-face with a stranger halfway around the world, no matter the differences in time zone or weather. The project’s claim that “despite our differences, we have much in common” is literalized by its mass-produced steel boxes. Despite our differences, we are all standing inside a dark box with stagnant air and faster-than-average internet speed. Ignoring the world outside becomes the setup for facilitating a one-to-one connection. While the containers’ nondescript interiors fulfill this immersive goal, the exteriors are anything but inconspicuous. The gold matte on the outside of the Portals containers makes them hard to miss within the heavily trafficked areas in cities around the world where they are located. These golden “black boxes” call out to passersby to enter a pod that will purportedly transport them across the world. In its standardization of connectivity, an aim both enabled and thwarted by relying on a shipping container as platform, the Portals project is mired in contradictions—generative, albeit frustrating, contradictions—that can help us explore the production of modularity and the management of differences in contemporary transnational communications.



**Figure 1. The Mexico City\_Portal, located near the entrance to the Bosque de Chapultepec park, set against the buildings of the Paseo de la Reforma avenue in Mexico City. Photo taken by author on 28 July 2019.**

The containment aspect of the shipping container—that its insides always look the same regardless of where it is stationed—undermines the project’s purported goal to connect across transnational differences. Portals boxes are often located in high-traffic, notorious spaces within a city. The Mexico City\_Portal stands at the entrance of the notorious Bosque de Chapultepec park, and the New York\_Portal was once located in Times Square. These locations are overridden with local fare and global trademarks, but the shipping containers actively work to shut out those specificities in favor of their one-to-one connections inside. Individuals coming into a call are not presented against their local context. Any relevant insights into what it is like to be there have to be conveyed verbally. Such stripping of local context is emblematic of the shipping container as a global standard. In the case of

Portals, these steel boxes serve to pare down the transnational communication process, metonymizing the communication infrastructure with a black-box-style channel and minimizing the channel's noise by literally blacking out all distractors. In this way, the project represents the most recent attempt at doubling down on the "linear" model of communication (sender-message-receiver) that Stuart Hall and cultural studies after him have long attempted to complicate.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, however, perhaps this aspiration to linearity and simplification explains the appeal of the shipping container as a portal for communication. Implicit in Portals's rhetoric about people's "desire to connect" and hopes of "making the world a better place" lies the ever-present specter of Marshall McLuhan's "global village," a utopian ideal where electronic communication technologies will bring about collaboration and understanding at a transnational scale. This ideal, still popular among techno-solutionist circles, is often misguided if not outright harmful. As Ginger Nolan demonstrates, the theoretical basis for the idea of the global village "was modeled on colonial strategies intended to transform the semiotic, economic, and spatial fabric of the decolonizing world" so as to protect the interests of erstwhile imperial powers in the aftermath of independence.<sup>5</sup> The twenty-first-century rhetoric of a networked global village, where the neo-imperialist forces of telecom conglomerates set standardization and interoperability, should likewise be approached with suspicion.

For one, there is the issue of language. Nolan usefully compares McLuhan's dreams of computers circumventing language differences via instantaneous translations with Ivor Armstrong Richards's advocacy of "Basic" English to argue that both models posit semiotic impoverishment as means to attain world peace.<sup>6</sup> Such a peace becomes possible only through the erasure of difference and the standardization of a Western-imposed model of communication. The ghost of Basic English haunts the interactions inside the Portals's shipping containers. In the three instances I have been in a Portals connection, English has been the default language for these interactions, even when the locations of both Portals were not predominantly English-speaking. Even when a so-called average person walking by a Portal might wish to engage in its ongoing call, the person's participation will be restricted by their ability to adhere to the hegemony of English as global lingua franca. In turn, any conversation inside these containers is limited by the participants' fluency in this language. How much can global understanding occur when we

all stick to ten-minute intervals of chit-chat? Activists protecting endangered languages already warn of the internet's protocols leading to "killer languages" that drown out or impede smaller languages from taking hold in networked culture.<sup>7</sup> The standardization of the communication channel is also the standardization of the conversational possibilities.

Another issue is the "platformization" of computer-mediated interactions as always already a commercial transaction. By "platformization," I draw on Marc Steinberg's genealogy of "mediation-type platform theory" as inspired by management studies, where the platform signifies something akin to the mediation structure or intermediary that makes certain kinds of transactions possible. Platforms enable specific forms of connection that "bring together groups of users and providers to form multisided markets."<sup>8</sup> The shipping container's seamless move from a transporter of goods to a transmitter of communication evidences its status as a platform that makes *certain kinds of transactions* possible. Its purpose is not only about simplifying the communication channel to eliminate all "noise"—including situated specificities disregarded as noise—but also about mobilizing this noiseless communication standard for profit-making schemes. Portals's global community members are not merely looking to find others with similar interests around the world. The true marker of success for these connections lies in the ventures spawned from such connections. Once you simplify the platform for international (communicative) transactions, the value of all such transactions is bound to be gauged by the same metric. An aggregate of "inspiring artists, entrepreneurs, changemakers, and community leaders" may begin as a group interested in a Sunday afternoon chat but ends up codified as a multisided market.

In the interest of full disclosure, I was almost put in charge of managing one of these gold-painted boxes. In the fall of 2018, the dean of my academic institution at the time was contacted about the possibility of hosting a Portal on our university campus. A colleague who researches interactive media in public spaces was tapped to lead the coordination and she invited me, resident global-media person, along for the ordeal. The Dallas Portal was to arrive in early 2019, and the local curators were looking for venues to host it during its year-long stay in the metropolitan area. Ultimately, the school did not host a Portal because the cost of renting the shipping container, even without factoring in electric bills and other maintenance expenses, proved to be prohibitive. The introduction to the project through this happenstance piqued my interest in the then-new, albeit soon-to-be normalized,

standardization of transnational connection and, at the same time, revealed the limited accessibility of such a purported global connector.



**Figure 2. The Dallas\_Portal, located in Klyde Warren Park north of downtown Dallas, with the Woodall Rodgers Freeway in the background. Photo taken by author on 6 March 2019.**

When we were debating whether to host a Portal at our campus, another one of our collaborators who fashioned himself a tech wizard argued that he could build a low-tech version of this portal in the corner of his lab with just a few cameras and interactive screens. He never followed through on that promise, yet the world soon turned to a version of this low-tech portal out of necessity. In March 2020, Zoom took over the world.

In some ways, the Portals project presaged the modularity of Zoom as a platform for global communication. In exchange for live responses from around the world, we reduce our form of presentation to a box the size of a screen. These boxes then stand in for, and in lieu of, a whole world around us. Guilherme da Silva Machado argues that in Zoom communication, all shots are close-ups: “all the elements within the individual image frames in

videoconferencing act as faces, i.e., they give rise to a view of the inner attributes and subjective states of their characters,” and thus “are *integrally* conceived as signifying surfaces of selves.”<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, everything out of frame can be elided: we can restrict what we show and appear instead as only an avatar or a face on-screen. On the other hand, we can bring in markers of difference through curation, by how we dress, what we place on the *mise-en-scène*, and how and when we choose to speak.

Such modular options for packaging differences for seamless transnational travel are emblematic of the shipping container as platform. The technology enabling communication recedes to the background in order to foreground the performance and the content on display. Indeed, the Portals shipping containers, much like the earlier versions of the Zoom app, are pared-down interfaces, nothing like the elaborate interactive possibilities of a streaming platform like Twitch or DouYu, or even the business-integrated suites like Microsoft’s Teams and Google’s Workspace. Nowadays, Zoom has made its interface more elaborate, and indeed during the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic, many Portals events transitioned to at-home meetings on Zoom. Yet the reopening of select Portals in 2021 meant a return to the black-box standard for transnational communication. Between 2020-2021, the Shared\_Studios website provided a disclaimer that “Due to Covid restrictions, our global network is shifting rapidly.” I remain curious how these steel boxes for transnational conferences will fare when we have all grown accustomed to—and perhaps already tired of?—tiny virtual boxes as our default mode of communication.

On a Friday morning in late April 2019, my colleagues and I visited Klyde Warren Park in downtown Dallas, then the location of Dallas\_Portal, to connect with the Stockholm\_Portal, which at the time was set in Fryshuset Park, an activity center for young people in Stockholm offering social projects and educational programs. After a few minutes of conversation (in English, small talk about the weather and the time zone), an ambulance roared past us on the highway. At the time, it felt jarring. “Sorry,” we said, after we had all paused our talking long enough for the alarm sounds to subside. By now, how many times have we muted our computer microphones when another siren rushes past outside our immediate physical space? That muting becomes another embodied part of the black-boxing of standardized communication, silencing the world offscreen to conform to efficient one-to-one conversations with people several miles and time zones away. So perhaps it will be all the more telling to find out how the dark, symmetrical, and

nondescript interiors of the Portals shipping containers transform after the global move to semiotically saturated interfaces. Consider how rarely we use a black background for Zoom calls, choosing instead an AI-enabled blurring or a picture background when we do not want to broadcast our surroundings to everyone online. Could it be that confronting the void of a nondescript space surrounding the digitally rendered images of ourselves forces us to contend with the modular and form-fitting design of our standard communication platforms?

## Notes

- 1 Marc Levinson, *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 2.
- 2 Lucy Hunter and R. Lyon, "Freight and Message: Views on Distribution and Standardization from a Shipping Container in Brooklyn," *Media Fields* 10 (2015), [mediafieldsjournal.squarespace.com/freight-and-message/](http://mediafieldsjournal.squarespace.com/freight-and-message/).
- 3 Quotes attributed to the Portals project or its creators throughout this essay come from the "Our Story" page as it was live in November 2021, which is no longer accessible. Throughout the years, the Shared\_Studios website has introduced the Portals project in a variety of ways, from an initial origins story to a more recent business-like mission statement. For reference, see Shared\_Studios, "Our Story | From art project to purpose-driven business," [web.archive.org/web/20210502073517/https://www.sharedstudios.com/shared-story](http://web.archive.org/web/20210502073517/https://www.sharedstudios.com/shared-story)
- 4 Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 1999): 90–103.
- 5 Ginger Nolan, "The Global Village," in *The Neocolonialism of the Global Village* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), [doi.org/10.5749/9781452961033](https://doi.org/10.5749/9781452961033).
- 6 Nolan, "Semiotic Poverty in the World," in *The Neocolonialism of the Global Village*.
- 7 Ross Perlin, "Cyborg Tongues," *Logic* 4 (1 April 2018), [logicmag.io/scale/cyborg-tongues/](http://logicmag.io/scale/cyborg-tongues/).
- 8 Marc Steinberg, "A Genesis of the Platform Concept: i-mode and Platform Theory in Japan," *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 4 (2017), 190–91.
- 9 Guilherme da Silva Machado, "Zoom in on the Face: The Close-Up at Work," in *Pandemic Media: Towards a Preliminary Inventory*, ed. Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini (Lüneburg, Germany: Meson Press, 2020), [pandemicmedia.meson.press/chapters/technologies-materialities/zoom-in-on-the-face-the-close-up-at-work/](http://pandemicmedia.meson.press/chapters/technologies-materialities/zoom-in-on-the-face-the-close-up-at-work/).

**Juan Llamas-Rodriguez** is assistant professor in the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. His book on media and border tunnels is forthcoming from University of Minnesota Press. He is the host of the Global Media Cultures podcast.