MOSAIC
A Celebration of Irish Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences
Lee Komito tells a story about a time in the mid 1990s when he was teaching a course at the University of Copenhagen. His students were a diverse bunch, drawn from countries across the European Union – France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Greece and elsewhere. Dr Komito, a Californian-reared anthropologist, would arrive early every morning to put the finishing touches to his lectures only to find the students already seated at their computers. They were there to catch up on the news from home, reading the online versions of their local newspapers. It was a revelatory moment. These were still early days for the internet and yet here already was evidence of the great influence it could exert. As Komito recalls, ‘These people were all together in Copenhagen, yet they remained ‘mentally, psychologically and emotionally’ at home’.

The development of new technology has changed profoundly the exile experience. Gone is the expectation that the physical location of a person might actually tie them to that locality. As if to underline to the scale of the change that has taken place, Komito points to the transformation of Irish emigrant experience. When Irish people left in the past, they often left for good and their knowledge of Ireland remained static, frozen at the moment of their departure. With telephone calls too expensive and letters too slow, contact with home was, for the most part, minimal. This is no longer the case. ‘For people leaving Ireland now’, Komito observes, ‘they’re on the phone almost every day, they’re listening to RTÉ radio online, they’re reading *The Irish Times* online, they’re sending messages back to their friends.’

This phenomenon is certainly not unique to the Irish abroad. Indeed, as it is with the Irish in America, Australia and elsewhere, so too it has been with the immigrant communities within Ireland. We know this primarily because Lee Komito has been leading an investigation into the impact of new technology on the lives of Polish and Filipino citizens living in Ireland. With funding from the IRCHSS, this work has shed considerable light on how Ireland’s immigrant groups interact with each other, with their countries of origin and with their host society. The results processed already show how improvements in web technology – skype, webcams and social networking sites – have facilitated greater contact between migrants and their home-place, but the effect of this has been to reduce their integration into the communities in which they have settled.

For Komito, the research has forced a rethink of his views on the idea of the virtual community. A mere three years ago, he would have dismissed such a notion as nonsense – ‘you can’t have a community when people come and go and have no investment in it’ – but this position has since softened to a new acceptance. What has changed is the technology and how it is used. Whereas the first wave of internet applications was either one to one or web-based, Komito points out that ‘social media is a group
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In the creation of this online community, Komito attaches great weight to the influence of photographs in enabling migrants to observe or monitor the activities of friends and relatives left behind. The web experience of one Polish respondent was typical of many of the responses Komito’s inquiries yielded. “They comment on my photos, I comment on their photos, without even talking to each other, but I know they’re there, I know they’re watching and I know we’re kind of in contact, so that’s enough to keep them, to make sure they are all right and I am all right.”

What attracted Komito to this world of social media is that which drew him to Ireland in the first place: intellectual curiosity. Komito has always been intrigued by the question of informal networks. And back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Ireland offered a perfect case study. The focus of Komito’s interest was political clientelism and he arrived in Ireland intent on examining the relationship between urban constituents and their politicians. Essentially, what he was investigating was whether or not people went to politicians for favours and whether or not politicians were claiming credit for things for which they didn’t deserve credit. It was potentially explosive subject-matter: this was a time when there were many controversial planning decisions in the Capital.
and Komito’s fieldwork took him to the centre of the decision-making process. He spent time talking with political activists and politicians and attending meetings of Dublin County Council. He also spent a lot of time in pubs – this was the ‘best place to find politicians’.

All of this may seem like a world apart from his current preoccupation with social media, but Komito, now based at the School of Information & Library Studies at UCD, is keen to stress the connections. For a start, the idea of informal networks was a thread that ran through them both. The importance of information was another. ‘One thing that emerged from the political clientelism study’, Komito states, ‘was the significance of information. Control over information, dissemination of information, access to information. What really drove the political clientelist system in Ireland was control over information.’

In the intervening years, advances in technology have changed the character of Irish political culture. Clientelism still exists, but not in the same form as the past. More online information and speedier decision making has reduced both the reliance on politicians for information and the time available for politicians to intervene on constituents’ behalf. In short, Komito explains, the ‘scope for alternative interventions has improved. One countervailing issue is the system has also gotten more complex, but it is also more complex for politicians to understand.

Help is sometimes needed to understand the system, but I’m not sure the system is any easier for some politicians to understand than it is for anybody else. So it’s levelled the playing field a bit.’

There’s no stopping the progress of technology. The information revolution has swept all before it for good and bad. Komito stresses the obvious benefits for isolated people on the margins of society who can now access information and connect to others in similar situations. But he is equally alarmed about the erosion of privacy and society’s casual response to it. The surveillance society that George Orwell wrote about in his famous book, 1984, looms ever larger and people – through their use of mobile phones, loyalty cards and the like – are passively conspiring in its creation. What is urgently needed, Komito believes, is legislation and education. Safeguards must be improved. ‘Society is too complex not to require digital technology to manage it. You can’t go back. What you can do is get better at the safeguards in terms of legislation and you can get better at educating individuals to be aware of the risks.’ This is now the challenge and in Lee Komito, Irish academia has someone to monitor how far it is being met.

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