

Social Media and Migration: virtual community 2.0

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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that migrants' social media usage in Ireland enables a background awareness of friends and acquaintances that supports bonding capital and transnational communities in ways not previously reported. Interview data from sixty-five Polish and Filipino non-nationals in Ireland provides evidence that their social media practices enable a shared experience with friends and relations living outside Ireland that is not simply an elaboration of the social relations enabled by earlier Internet applications. Social media usage enables a passive monitoring of others, through the circulation of voice, video, text, and pictures, that maintains a low level mutual awareness and supports a dispersed community of affinity. This ambient, or background, awareness of others enhances and supports dispersed communities by contributing to bonding capital. This may lead to significant changes in the process of migration by slowing down the process of integration and participation in host societies while also encouraging continual movement of migrants from one society to another.

Introduction

Changes in communication and interaction between people, the exchange of goods, services and information amongst people, and the movement of people from one locality to another have often been discussed in the context of emergent information and communication technologies. Are recent social media developments (e.g., social networking applications such as Facebook and Friendster, Twitter, LinkedIn, and so on) responsible for further social transformation? Debates about the social effect of new social media technologies have special relevance for migrants since, as dislocated individuals who have grown up in one society and now live or work elsewhere, changes in communication technologies are likely to have a significant effect on their lives. Evidence from numerous studies indicates that new social media enhance migrants' capacities to maintain family and kinship contacts across long distances, to create extensive personal networks, and to participate in the national debates of their home societies through transnational associations. There has been less evidence regarding the effect of social media on links between migrants and the communities in which they grew up. To what extent do new technologies enable migrants to participate in the communities that they have left, so as to remain part of that home community?

This article reports on the social media practices of non-nationals in Ireland. The research explored the effect of these practices on long distance relations of affinity and community by interviewing over 65 Polish and Filipino non-nationals currently resident in Ireland over a period of two years. Quantitative and qualitative data was obtained on information needs, information seeking strategies, social media and other technology usage, as well as patterns of communication. The research suggests that social media practices enable non-nationals to maintain strong ties of affinity

(regardless of geographical distance), as well as facilitating their participation in the community in which they grew up. The ability for migrants to maintain their affiliation with a local community will inevitably have implications for processes of migration and integration.

Migration, Community and New Communications Technologies

The social consequences of new information and communications technologies (ICTs) has engendered phrases such as the “annihilation of space” and “death of distance” (Cairncross, 1997). These phrases encapsulate the expectation that distance no longer limits communication between people, and, as a result, existing social forms will be transformed and new forms will emerge. Yet, although discussions about the social consequences of new technologies are common place, there is little agreement about how existing structures are transforming or new ones emerging. One initial focus had been the capacity of online interactions to facilitate virtual communities that mimic traditional face to face communities (Jones, 1998; Komito, 1998, 2001; Preece, 2000; Rheingold, 1994; Smith & Kollock, 1999). Since then, researchers have focused on patterns of sociability that combine online and offline interactions across a range of social networks, through which individuals make contacts, seek information, and give and get help. These individuals participate in a number of different networks but the members of networks may not know each other, leading to the phrase ‘networking individualism’ (Castells, 2001; Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qiu, & Sey, 2006; Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002; Wellman et al., 2003). More recently, it has been suggested that ‘networked individualism’ should be rephrased as ‘networked sociability’, since new technologies not only facilitate ego-centered networks, but can also support peer-group formation, thus enabling community formation as well (Castells et al., 2006, p. 143-144). The discussion has also broadened out to include ongoing debates about social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001; Portes & Landolt, 1996; Putnam, 2000) – the benefits provided to both individuals and society by social networks. ‘Network capital’, defined as the “capacity to engender and sustain social relations with individuals who are not necessarily proximate, which generates emotional, financial and practical benefit” (Larsen & Urry, 2008, p. 93) has been used to describe the benefits enabled by new technologies.

Much of the debate about the effect of new technologies on social relations revolves around varying definitions of community. While there is a large amount of evidence that personal relations, especially the ‘weak ties’ of acquaintanceship (Granovetter, 1973, 1982), are created and maintained using new technologies (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2006; Gilbert, Karahalios, & Sandvig, 2010; Haythornthwaite, 2002; Kavanaugh, Reese, Carroll, & Rosson, 2003), evidence regarding the effect of new technologies of the creation and maintenance of community is less clear and often contradictory. Initially, debate centred on whether the communal solidarities of traditional physical communities could manifest themselves in the electronic environment. These debates were problematic since definitions of “community” vary (Bell & Newby, 1971; Efrat, 1974; Frankenberg, 1969; Gans, 1962; Wellman, 1988; Wellman & Leighton, 1979), and there is no agreed diagnostic “litmus test” for community (suggested criteria include high levels of interaction, mutual regard, shared ideology, long-term participation, economic interdependence, or overlapping and close-knit relations). Many would argue that “online community” is a contradiction in terms; individuals participate in numerous groups or communities, communication amongst individuals in such groups combines face to face, print, electronic and digital media, and the characteristics of the groups that emerge do not correspond to traditional notions of community (for summaries of this debate, see Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004; Fernback, 2007; Komito, 1998, 2001; Postill, 2008).

More recently, the issue has reframed using the vocabulary of social capital, in which “strong ties” are taken to be similar to bonding capital and both, as manifestations of trust and mutual support, are taken to be indicative of ‘community’ (Gilbert et al., 2010; Kavanaugh et al., 2003;

Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001; Wellman et al., 2003). The emergence of 'social networking' Internet applications (e.g., Bebo, Facebook, Friendster, LinkedIn) has given new impetus to the discussion of online or virtual communities, but also led to confusion between personal networks of individuals and the collective attributes of groups or communities. This is clear in the interchangeable use of "strong ties", which indicate the strength and significance of the relationship amongst individuals (Granovetter, 1973, 1982), and "bonding capital", which is an attribute of the social group (Putnam, 2000). While social networking applications (as well as other social media applications) enable individuals to maintain strong links with other individuals across distances (e.g., "networked individualism"), it remains unclear whether they also facilitate shared mutual regard, close-knit and overlapping relations, economic interdependence (or any of the other collective attributes associated with communities) across distances.

Migration and new technologies

Migrants' communications practices provides an excellent opportunity to explore community in the context of new social media. People vary in the extent to which new technologies might have consequences for their lives and social relationships. At one end of the spectrum are those who live in localities in which their interaction with significant others (such family, extended kin, neighbours, work colleagues) is largely face to face; for such people the effect of new technologies on social life is minimal. Towards the other end of the spectrum are migrants who leave the communities in which they were born but who try to maintain contact with friends and relations that they have left behind. Of course population movement is not new; people have always moved from one locality to another, and from one society to another, for multiple reasons, including economic opportunity, political necessity, and personal preference. However, it has been argued that, since World War II, and especially since the 1980s, population movement has increased (Castles & Miller, 2003, p. 7-9). As the numbers involved in migration has grown, the limitations imposed by distance have become increasingly significant. Many of these individuals do not necessarily intend to remain in their new locality and wish to retain contact with the society and community in which they grew up. Face to face communication with family, relations, and friends is hindered by distance, since the cost (and disruption) of transportation precludes frequent contact; new technologies can ameliorate their isolation. Their technology practices thus provide useful insight into the capabilities for transformation afforded by new technologies, while, at the same time, providing an example of the transformative impact that new technologies can have on social formations.

Much is known about the impact of information and communication technologies on migrants' relationship with home and host societies. Historically, individuals often go to where they already have contacts, through chain or snowball migration (MacDonald & MacDonald, 1964), and continue to maintain contacts with friends and relations in their home society (Mitchell, 1969). Sometimes, as they integrate into their host society, they create small enclave communities (Barth, 1969), such as Indians in London or Irish in Boston. Often there has been a complex bricolage, as transplanted elements combine with elements from the host society, with new forms emerging (e.g., Clifford, 1994). In tandem with the increased migration of the 1980's has come significant technological transformations. The emergence of new technologies, leading to reduced communication costs and 'rich' communication content (in conjunction with decreased travel costs), is changing migration processes and structures. New technologies made snowball migration easier by increasing the number of friends and relations abroad who can be found and might be willing to provide assistance. New technologies have also facilitated the emergence of transnational identities, that is, individuals who view themselves as members of a national or ethnic group despite the fact that they do not live in the geographical areas associated with those nations or ethnicities. Transnationalism becomes a new factor in processes of integration, assimilation and/or diversity in

host societies, especially as new technologies enable migrants to express their commitment to their home society using web sites, discussion lists and digital media (Cohen, 1997; Portes, 2001; Sökefeld, 2006; Tyner & Kuhlke, 2000), while also facilitating long distance social networks (e.g., Hiller & Franz, 2004).

It was presumed, in the early days of the Internet, that fast and inexpensive electronic communication (email, discussion lists, bulletin boards) would change traditional patterns of migration. No longer would individuals be cut off from their friends and family when they left their home culture; they could both maintain personal contacts and also participate in an ethnic or national 'diaspora'. Brekke (2008, p. 111) highlights the importance of the Internet for maintaining social relationships: "Chatting on the Internet is the most important way of keeping up with 'online friends' all over the world." Similarly, Wilding (2006, p. 131) notes, in her study of migrant families in the late 1990s, that those who adopted email reported that their frequency of communication increased significantly: "Short messages ... about 'nothing in particular', were exchanged several times a day." It is clear the use of these technologies for long distance one-to-one communication had consequences for daily social life: "By using the Internet they are not so dependent upon finding friends and developing social networks in their geographic proximity, and regard online friends as being just as adequate as the people they meet face-to-face." (Brekke, 2008, p. 111)

Although the effect of new technologies on personal networks and transnational identity is better understood as a result of recent research, the relevance of new technologies for communities is less clear. As noted, migrants maintain long distance personal networks characterised as 'networked individualism', and also express their national or ethnic identity via online activities. What impact do new technologies have on individuals' ability to participate in communities? Can they continue to participate in the life of the community they have left, or perhaps create new 'electronic' communities to replace it? Initially, it was suggested that solidarities similar to the solidarities of traditional face to face physical communities, were possible as a result of new technologies. However, critics argued that these solidarities (often described as virtual communities), by definition, lacked the fundamental characteristics of "community", such as individual mutual interdependence, long-term involuntary participation in the group, lack of shared identity (for a review of these discussions, see Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004; Fernback, 2007; Komito, 1998, 2001). The debate has lost relevance as researchers realised the distinction between electronic and physical communities is simplistic and misleading: individuals participate in numerous groups or communities, and individuals in such groups combine face to face, print, electronic and digital media in their communication practices.

However, electronic communication, and the solidarities supported by such communication are still important for migrants who wish to continue their participation in home communities and social groups. While the decreasing cost of travel enables migrants to avail of more frequent physical visits home than would have been possible ten or twenty years ago, electronic communication remains an important resource to maintain their links with their home community. In contrast to earlier Internet applications, social media and other recently emerging technologies provide new opportunities for migrants who wish to maintain contact with friends and relations they have left. Some of these technologies fall within the rubric of Web 2.0, because they depend on user-generated content, the combination of multiple applications into one interface, and rapid dissemination of multiple modes of content (O'Reilly, 2005; Vickery & Wunsch-Vincent, 2007), but other technologies are incremental technical developments (e.g., texting via mobile phones, or voice over Internet). In all cases, there is increased media richness in the content being communicated, at substantially lower cost and faster dissemination speed (Komito, 2008).

If these new technologies enable migrants to participate in the communities they have left behind, or create alternative new electronic communities, these groups will become resources used

by migrants and will have an impact on migration processes. Early research suggests that these technologies do have the potential to change previous patterns of migration. Thus, a recent report prepared for the European Commission (Borkert, Cingolani, & Premazzi, 2009, p. 2) notes the emergence of the 'connected migrant' (taken from Diminescu, 2008): "The present-day migrant is the representative of a new culture of mobility which entails international geographical mobility and also digital mobility. In spite of distance, the modalities of connection allow a continuous copresence, which disturbs the sociological classical interpretations of the migrants in terms of 'twofold absence': absence from home, but also absence of proper integration in the destination country". It is not yet clear how new technologies will affect the nature of migration and of being a migrant, and whether the high rate of communication among migrant communities is modifying patterns of departures and returns, leading to the emergence of "peripatetic mobile workers" (Komito & Bates, 2009, p. 243). A recent study on migration in Europe, carried out on behalf of the European Community, identified, amongst other topics, two important issues that arise as a result of new technologies:

- how the synchronicity of local and long distance connectivity in migrants' lives affects the nature of migration and of being a migrant.
- the circularity of people and the role of ICT: how the high rate of communication among migrant communities is modifying patterns of departures and returns. (Borkert et al., 2009)

Will new technologies enable migrants to continue their participation in their home communities, and, if they do, what impact will this have on processes of migration and integration?

Research Study: social media use by migrants in Ireland

A two year research project, funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS), examines the use of new social media by two groups of non-nationals in Ireland, its' impact on dispersed communities, and its' relevance for processes of migration and integration. Individuals have been interviewed three times over two years, to obtain longitudinal data about changes in information needs, communication practices and technology usage. Will new technologies enable them to maintain contacts in such a way as to remain part of home community? If so, has such a virtual life reduced chances of participation and integration into their host society, since there may be less need for contact with people in host society? If other members of the home community have also become migrants, are contacts maintained amongst all such migrants as well as individuals who have remained home?

Research Participants

Ireland has had a long history of emigration, and its citizens left to work in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia and elsewhere, often not to return. During the last decade however, circumstances have changed (at least temporarily); as the Irish economy began to grow, a large number of Irish abroad returned to Ireland. In addition, an expanding labour market attracted a large number of non-Irish to Ireland. In the 2006 Census, out of a total population of 4,172,013, over 10 percent were classified as "non-Irish"

(<http://www.cso.ie/statistics/nationalityagegroup.htm>).[1] While a significant number were English speaking (UK and US, primarily), there were also many migrants from Asia, Eastern Europe and Africa. In this study, individuals from Poland and the Philippines were interviewed. These two groups were chosen because both are well represented in Ireland; there are individuals in both migrant groups from diverse social backgrounds and both groups are, in their home countries, prolific users of new social media (Universal McCann, 2008).

In Ireland, Polish citizens constitute the largest non-English speaking group. After Poland joined the European Union in 2004, Ireland was one of three existing EU members to permit Polish citizens to work in Ireland without restriction (the others being the United Kingdom and Sweden).

Ireland quickly became a popular destination for Polish migration, and the 2006 Census figure of 63,276 is likely to be an underestimation. It is notable that a Polish language jobsite launched in Poland in May 2004, with information about jobs and coming to Ireland to work, received over 170,000 hits on its first day (<http://www.rte.ie/business/2004/0519/internet.html>). In 2006, statistics regarding the allocation of PPS (Personal Public Service) numbers, required for employment, indicated 94,000 arrivals from Poland, as compared with 22,000 from the UK, the next largest group. The Polish population in Ireland is largely young and male. According to the 2006 Census, over half the Polish population in Ireland was aged between 25 and 44, and nearly two-thirds were male. More than a quarter (27.2 per cent) of the 49,014 Poles in Ireland aged 15 or over had a post-secondary education and 12.3 per cent had a postgraduate qualification (Central Statistics Office, 2008).

There is also a significant Filipino population in Ireland, although this is a relatively recent development (i.e. over the last ten years), and there are no historic ties between the two countries. Many of the Filipino workers in Ireland are employed as nurses: “The Philippines was targeted as a major reservoir of nursing labour, and Ireland quickly became a major destination for Filipino nurses (in 2002 it was the third largest importer of Filipino nurses, after Saudi Arabia and the UK)” (Yeates, 2006, p. 13). According to Arguillas (2009, p. 1) “between 1999-2006, the Philippines deployed 6,505 workers [to Ireland] -- 54 percent are nurses and 7 out of 10 (69.76 percent) are women.” As Yeates (2004, p. 90) notes, “For the foreseeable future, nursing labour imported from the Philippines will continue to be essential to the basic functioning of the Irish health system - nurses from the Philippines already account for one in five of the nursing staff in Irish hospitals” (from McDonagh, 2003).

Polish workers have more labour flexibility and mobility than Filipinos, because they have a legal entitlement to work in Ireland, while Filipinos depend on employment contracts and sometimes may have paid substantial amounts to intermediaries in order to obtain legal employment (Dundon, González-Pérez, & McDonough, 2007). On the other hand, residence patterns demonstrate similar processes: “We found, especially in the case of Filipino, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish and Chinese workers, that they share accommodation with people from the same region; in some cases as many as four people were sharing a single room in order to either save money to send home, or to be able to repay recruitment agencies” (Dundon et al., 2007, p. 512). The social media expertise of individuals in these two groups, the social and economic diversity within these groups, and the differing legal and work entitlements of these two provides an excellent opportunity to examine the impact of migrants’ social media practices. The impacts discerned in this study can inform the wider experience of migration in the context of social media practices, and how these practices are changing migration and integration globally.

Data Collection

Over sixty-five non-nationals participated in the study.[2] Questions were designed to enable analysis from multiple perspectives: narratives for ethnographic analysis, communication data for social network analysis, information needs assessment, and technology usage practices (c.f., Srinivasan & Pyati, 2007). Respondents were interviewed by research assistants and interviews lasted about 1 to 1 1/2 hours; if the participants agreed, they were interviewed two more times over the next 1 1/2 years. Interviews usually took place in the participant’s house, but sometimes in a public location; they were recorded and narrative sections of the interviews were transcribed. In the first and third interviews, about two-thirds of the questions were closed questions with restricted choice while the other third were either short answer or open-ended questions. The interview schedule contained 66 questions (with many questions having additional sub-questions), and was used to create 163 variables, which was saved in an SPSS file. Participants were asked about information needs and information seeking behaviours (both prior to their arrival in Ireland and since

their arrival), use of mass media and social media, patterns of social life in Ireland and contacts with friends and relations abroad. Research assistants encouraged the respondents to expand their answers, so as to obtain narrative accounts whenever possible, and these were analysed separately. Participants were asked to name the six most significant individuals in their life, and provide biographical data on each of the six contacts. In contrast to interviews one and three, the second set of interviews elicited narratives in which participants were asked to expand on issues that arose from a preliminary analysis of the first phase of interviews. While all respondents from the Philippines could be interviewed through English, there were a significant proportion of Polish respondents whose English was poor. These were interviewed by a Polish speaking research assistant, who then translated the answers.

Respondents were recruited through word of mouth, friends of friends, or opportunistic approaches, by four different researchers; although a few respondents knew some other participants, most did not know each other. All respondents were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity, and no respondents were in a position of dependency or vulnerability that might have compelled participation. All were provided, afterwards and without prior notice, a small purchase token that could be used in a local department store; the token was provided as a “thank you” rather than as an inducement to participate in the research.

While the story of each respondent is of merit in its own right, it is also useful to be able to extrapolate from the respondents’ responses to the wider population. In order to monitor whether respondents were representative of the wider population, they were compared with the demographic characteristics of the two migrant groups in Ireland. According to most recent census statistics (Central Statistics Office, 2008), nearly half of Polish non-nationals live in Dublin, a Dublin suburb or another city, while another 23 percent live in a town with a population of 10 thousand or more; two-thirds are male, seventy percent are the 20-34 age group (average age 27.5 years), and over 60 per cent were single. Employment was mainly in the lower socio-economic groups, and forty percent had either completed third level education or considered themselves still in education. The Filipino population differs in many respects. Most live in cities (two thirds of Filipinos live in either Dublin or a smaller city), are more likely to be female (nearly 60%), and are in their thirties rather than twenties. Most Filipinos are married, but a significant portion were not living with their spouse. Fifty percent had third level qualifications, largely in health related subjects, and over sixty percent worked in the health sector.

By and large, these differences were replicated in the interview sample: 53 percent of Polish respondents were male, as compared with 45 percent of Filipino respondents, most Polish respondents were between 25 and 34, while Filipino respondents were between 35 and 44. Twenty-six percent of Polish respondents were non-manual employees, while 45 percent of Filipino respondents were non-manual. Ninety percent of Filipinos had third level education, as compared with 47 percent of Polish respondents. Only 59 percent of Polish respondents have some family member with them in Ireland, as compared with 85 percent of Filipino respondents. While the demographic match is not perfect,[3] given that a sample size of sixty-five individuals, some distortion was inevitable. The sample matches the wider Polish and Filipino population sufficiently to provide confidence in patterns that emerge from the data.

Results

New Technologies, Information and Social Life

Participants were asked how they keep in touch with friends and relations; as Table 1 indicates, they use a variety of electronic media. Participants are comfortable users of electronic media; while some used only one mode, many used as many as four or five modes of electronic communication interchangeably. Filipinos exhibit a slightly lower pattern of multiple usage (2.55 for

Filipino versus 2.74 for Polish participants), but for both groups there was still significant overlapping use of various modes of communication. Few confined themselves to only one or even two modes of communication (median, for both groups, was three modes of communication), and most used a different mix of communication modes to contact friends and relations in Ireland versus friends and relations abroad.

TABLE 1
Polish and Filipino use of communication media to contact friends/relations

mobile phone	74%
Skype	59%
Landline	32%
SMS texting	27%
Gadu-Gadu, (Polish Instant Messaging)	24%
Nasza Klasa (Polish social media site)	18%
face to face	15%
VOIP other than Skype	9%
Facebook	3%

landline	55%
Instant Messaging (usually Yahoo Messenger)	39%
mobile	35%
SMS texting	26%
face to face	19%
social networking site	19%
internet	19%
email	16%
Skype	13%
webcam	13%

Polish respondents (n=34)

Filipino respondents (n=31)

Social networking sites were relevant for most migrants: 30% of Polish respondents use a social networking site (SNS) once a day, and another 26% several times a week, while 37% Filipinos use a social networking site daily, and another 26% several times a week. However, social media, such as social networking applications, are by no means the only (or most important) communications technology used. As one participant noted:

“I always use the mobile phone. I know there is a special number you can use to have cheaper calls, but I don’t use it. I usually use my mobile phone and contact people on their landline in Poland. Here I call people on their mobiles and landlines as well. When I contact people in Poland I mainly call their landlines, sometimes when they are not at home I call them on their mobiles as well, but very rarely. Landlines are much cheaper, and the quality is much better as well... Here in Ireland – mobile calls (mobile to mobile). From Poland – I call them once a week and they give me information about the things from the whole week. I call both my daughter and my son. When I do not expect any special news from them, you usually know if something is going to happen or not, I call them once a week. If anything unusual happens during the week, texts are sent. Otherwise, I call them just once or sometimes twice a week. I call friends as well, but not very often. I call only some of my friends and get news from them about other people.”

Comment [LK1]: (Ewa, interview 15, Polish, F, 55-64, translated from Polish)

As well as webcam, as noted by two other participants:

“Um, through the internet, I use the webcam... Yahoo, and sometimes I use Skype as well but not that much, Yahoo Messenger I use a lot of the time. Sometimes I use the talk extra as well but um, it’s cheaper to use the internet because you can talk them face-to-face although they are at home, using the webcam you know, you can see them as well.”

Comment [LK2]: (Jean, interview 6, Filipino, F, 25-34)

“Through email and every weekend we do a chat online with web cam, because my mum is in Netherlands and my siblings are in the Philippines. Yeah it’s like a conference call.”

Comment [LK3]: (Nuala, interview 3, Filipino, M, 25-44)

In addition to phone, webcam, and VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol), reduced transportation costs also play a part, especially for Polish participants:

“Because every 2 weeks or once a month I try to visit all of them. I can’t every time but I mostly visit the most important ones for me every time I’m at home. I’m supposed to go home every two weeks but once a month is alright. I’m doing my study for four years so I’m in touch with them pretty much and when I go there [Poland] I ring them as well. Now it’s [college course] about to finish but for that time it worked like that.”

Comment [LK4]: (Jean, interview 2, Polish, M, 25-34)

These respondents are, indeed, ‘connected’ migrants (Diminescu, 2008). They possess significant expertise regarding a range of digital technologies, and feel comfortable moving from one technology to another, as context demands. Virtually all respondents use the Internet. Two-thirds of Polish respondents and 90% of Filipino respondents owned a laptop or netbook, 80% used webcams, over 90% had high speed broadband (compared with the national average of 75%), many accessed the Internet using mobile devices, and all used mobile phones. Almost all Polish respondents use VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol), either Skype or GaduGadu, while most, but not all, Filipinos use VoIP. Most are comfortable in a digital world, and use whatever technology is convenient to maintain contact with fellow nationals.

New technologies are used to coordinate social life, as well as maintain contact with friends and relations. About 60% see fellow nationals at least once a week and about 10% see fellow nationals several times a week. A significant number of Filipinos arrange meetings through a combination of face to face and mobile phone (speech and text) modes, which is easily done for those Filipino nurses who see fellow nationals in their work context (Filipinos tend to live near their place of work and with fellow Filipinos). Residence patterns of Polish migrants tend to be dispersed, and they are more likely to depend on mobile phone (speech and/or text) to organise their social life, largely at weekends. The social life of Polish and Filipino migrants is an ethnically circumscribed one; most report that they largely socialize with fellow migrants, organised via mobile phone and texting. Of course mobile phone and texting is a widespread means of coordinating social life for most people, but, in the context of migrants, it enables individuals who are geographically dispersed to still meet face to face. Such a circumscribed social life is what many migrants said they desired. This facility was not previously available at such a low opportunity cost; previously, it requiring the close residential proximity characteristic of ethnic enclave communities. Now, mobile phones enable migrants to organise a social life that can include only fellow non-nationals, even when those non-nationals are dispersed throughout the city.

Migrants' information sources

New technologies are also used to obtain information, as well as maintain social contacts. These technologies have become more important for migrants since their arrival in Ireland, as Table 2 makes clear. Respondents were asked to list the sources they used when they needed information in Ireland, the sources they used to get information about Ireland before their arrival, and the sources they would use if they were planning to leave Ireland for another location. They could list as many information sources as they wanted, and they were not asked to rank their choices. Choices such as newspapers, television, radio, employment agencies and government offices are grouped together as 'public', in that they are all impersonal, authoritative, and enable the migrant to remain anonymous. The Internet was less important than friends and family sources of information about Ireland before arrival, and did not increase in significance once in Ireland. On the other hand, friends and family tended to be replaced by various authoritative sources (newspapers, television, government offices, radio [4]) as information sources. It is notable, however, that when asked how they would get information about a new location if they were going to move away from Ireland, the Internet emerged as the central information source. For migrants whose lives are nomadic, the Internet is a vital resource to assist them in their transient lives.

TABLE 2
Information Sources

Before arrival	In Ireland	If moving	Information Sources
11%	9%	30%	Internet only
31%	35%	73%	Internet (only or in addition to other sources)
61%	43%	25%	Friends/family (only or in addition to other sources)
28%	14%	11%	Friends/family only (without any other sources)
31%	49%	19%	"Public" (only or in addition to other sources)

Strong Ties at a Distance

This digital competence has implications beyond the use of new technologies to socialize with friends in Ireland or get information. Respondents were asked to list the six most significant individuals in their life; most listed individuals of the same nationality as themselves. Perhaps not surprisingly, a high percentage the six significant contacts were also related through kinship. In the case of Polish respondents, 52 percent of the six contacts were closely related, as were 66 percent of Filipinos' contacts. Based on a different question, Filipinos are more likely than Poles to have family in Ireland (59 percent of Polish have some family member in Ireland, as compared with 81 percent of Filipinos, and most Filipinos had both partner and children in Ireland). Despite this difference in the proximity of kin relations, both groups have a similar percentage of kin relations amongst their top six significant contacts. This raises an interesting difference: Polish respondents list almost as many kin as significant links as do Filipinos, even though they have fewer family members residing with them. Migrants, like most others, maintain strong attachments to close kin relations, even if they did not contact them very often or very effectively. Interestingly, in both groups, mothers and sisters are the most frequently mentioned.[5] The strength of family is not limited by geography; kinship links remain important and durable, regardless of where the kin relation lives.

Half of the six significant contacts are in Ireland; most of the other half live in the respondent's home country (see Table 3). Given the preceding discussion, it might be expected that the strength of kinship explains the significant contacts who live outside Ireland. Indeed, it is the case that 91% of first ranked contacts are likely to be a kin relation (even though only 47 percent of those first ranked contacts live in Ireland); this evidence supports the view that strength of kinship ties explains the durability of contacts, despite long distances and infrequent visits. However, investigation of less significant contacts indicates that the situation is more complex. Sixty percent of 6th ranked contacts are not kin relations, and, within that 60 percent of non-kin significant contacts, half live outside Ireland. Thus, long-distance social contacts are being maintained with people who are not related to those Polish and Filipino migrants living in Ireland. The question arises – would friendship relations not be expected to atrophy over time, or are new technologies contributing to the survival of such long distance friendship relations? While most of the Polish participants had only been in Ireland for about five years (and indicated a desire to return to Poland after about five years), Filipino participants varied in their length of residence. The percentage of 'significant others' in Ireland increased for those who have lived in Ireland more than five years, which suggests a trend towards integration in Ireland. However, this was only due to a decrease in links outside of Ireland or the Philippines; the percentage of 'significant others' in their home country remains the same, regardless of length of stay in Ireland. Length of stay in Ireland does not seem to reduce the significance of links with the home community.

TABLE 3
Residence of Significant Contacts

Poland Philippines	Ireland	elsewhere	
48%	46%	6%	Polish (all)
48%	37%	15%	Filipino (all)
43%	35%	22%	Filipino (resident 2-5 years)
44%	47%	8%	Filipino (resident 5+ years)

Monitoring Friends

Evidence suggests the persistence of long distance ties of affinity is being supported by new social media. Participants were asked to discuss their use of social media, and their responses indicate that these new media are being used for different purposes than email, phone conversations, or texting. Polish and Filipino nationals in Ireland are proficient users of digital media, and new technologies enable both social contact and support for these foreign nationals. However, social media applications are not used in the same way, or with the same outcome, as previous electronic media. While social networking sites can be used for email and other forms of messaging (such as comments), they are rarely used by these non-nationals for such an active form of communication between individuals. When asked how they contacted friends and family (an active and purposeful communicative act), most did not mention social networking sites and, instead, enumerated one-to-one communication modes such as email, texting or Skype. They do use social networking sites frequently (37% every day, and an additional 25% several times a week), but, when asked what they used the social networking sites for, the most common phrases that were used were: “**check** messages”, “**browse** photos”, “**look** for friends”. These are passive, rather than active, verbs and emphasize the monitoring function that these Internet applications provide, as illustrated by these four Polish participants:

“The main thing I do on Nasza Klasa is just ‘peeping’ on others. I’m not involved in any kind of creating groups, or making **contacts**.”

Comment [LK5]: (Ewa, interview 8, Polish, F, 25-34, translated from Polish)

“I like peeping at them, to know what they do now, how they look like now and what their life is **like**.”

Comment [LK6]: (Ewa, interview 3, Polish, Polish, M, 25-44, translated from Polish)

“I only visit Nasza Klasa when I have time or I want to find a specific person. ... Just to check what other people are up to, to see their photos. I just log in and check the photos only, I’m not really involved in Nasza Klasa. I don’t send messages or answer them, I’ve never answered any message so far. I type in the name and surname of the person I want to find, and I only check their photos to see whether they’ve changed a **lot**.”

Comment [LK7]: (Ewa, interview 1, Polish, F, 25-44, translated from Polish)

“I visit it [Nasza Klasa] just to check what’s going on. ... to see their photos (both on Facebook and Nasza Klasa), just to check what other people are up to, not necessarily to get in touch with **them**.”

Comment [LK8]: (Ewa, interview 2, Polish, M, 25-44, translated from Polish)

Although these phrases are slightly more prevalent amongst Polish nationals, similar phrases are expressed by two Filipinos as well:

“we post pictures and I get to see my friends photos as well and then I would know how well their coping, how well their doing with their job and all that, ... it’s more of an entertainment ((laughs)) and you know a kind of past time kind of thing... just to keep updated with my **friends**.”

Comment [LK9]: (Jean, interview 5, Filipino, F, 35-44)

“So I just want to check what’s going on with my friends there and to check photos as **well**.”

Comment [LK10]: (Jean, interview 9, Filipino, F, 25-34)

While new technologies provide additional means for the every more effective extension and maintenance of personal networks (as noted by Wellman et al., 2003), the use of these applications is having other consequences as well. Two-thirds of respondents use social networking sites to check what their friends have been doing and the consequence of that support communities of affinity as well as personal networks.

Ambient Presence: community as background

As new technologies and reduced transportation costs enable migrants to maintain contact and identification with their friends, family and home community, the physical locality in which a migrant lives can become unobtrusive background to a technologically mediated life. Consistent low-level monitoring, combined with active messaging, provides a background to the daily lives of these Polish and Filipino nationals. It is important to note that this is not the one-way communication that is characteristic of lurking or voyeurism. Those doing the posting of information not only know that others are going to look but can see that they have looked, so the communication is mutual monitoring: the monitored know who is monitoring them [6], as these two quotes indicate:

“Some of them went back home now because of the recession. ... Everybody has something to say, you know. You just talk to people, you tell them how you feel about different things, what has happened to you, you just share this kind of things. ... on Nasza Klasa you send a message, and then, you wait for an answerer, that’s how

you can talk with others there. Then, the person reads the message you've sent and answers you back the next day or in two or three days time. That's how you talk to people there. ... What I do is browsing photos. ... when I have new messages, I read them.”

Comment [LK11]: (Ewa, interview 6, Polish, M, 35-44, translated from Polish)

“Friendster, Facebook...Every day! Every time I wake up, I just check on my phone...Check mails, check new profiles, check photos, to keep up to date. Sometimes they would leave messages instead of emailing you, sometimes they just want to know like you know, just to let everybody know that somebody is asking like this and that...I usually check my mails first. It's a way of like keeping in touch, sometimes they post a shout out, I don't do it for myself, I just want to read what they are up to.”

Comment [LK12]: (Nuala, interview 7, Filipino, F, 25-44)

The previous vignettes make it clear that, while social media may be used to enable one-to-one purposeful communicative act, it is also being used to provide users with a low intensity participation in the lives of people they know. Respondents were fervent in the significance they attached to being able to see photographs of people they knew, in addition to the descriptions of activities they could read about. In their accounts, it was clear that the visual images provided a sense of intimacy and immediacy that text did not. It is significant that these activities do not involve a large investment of time by these individuals; many say they check the sites only a few times a week and their use of the social media sites is of short duration.

Polish and Filipino nationals visit sites, browse photos, and check postings and this creates and maintains a background or context for the one-to-one communications that individuals also engage in. In fact, these monitoring activities are crucial in enabling effective one-to-one communication to continue over time. It is not necessarily that personal networks can not develop and endure without this background, but that the networks may endure longer. One Polish respondent, who is now back in Poland, commented that she expected that she would stay friendly with someone she met who lives in Cork even without the exchange of photos and messages via social networking sites, but the exchange of photos and messages makes it "so much easier, so much nicer to know details...". As she further commented, "it is easier, because you know what they have been doing". Another commented that she would not have contacted an old friend if she had not been able to see what he had been "up to" in recent years, as evidenced by his postings to a social networking site that she had access to.

This low level background, or ambient, presence, (similar to ambient or background noise in a room) is not restricted to personal ego-centred networks [7]; information circulates amongst friends, helping to maintain the cross-cutting information flows characteristic of communities. Thus, the same respondent (now back in Poland) commented that friends will tell her that they know what she had been doing the previous weekend, even without her posting any photos or messages, because other friends will post information that includes either photographs of her or messages about her. A similar observation was made by a Filipino respondent:

“I would say it would still be the same. I mean like but I think it's an advantage because it's more easier to communicate with friends I mean without those technologies I'd say you know we use other means like phoning them or things like that but am I'd say you reach out more on more friends, you know for example you one of your friend would actually connect to another one and oh! She's on my account, so it actually spreads out.”

Comment [LK13]: (Jean, interview 5, Filipino, F, 35-44)

Discussion

The debate about the difference between ‘community’ and extended personal networks is almost a philosophical, as well as theoretical, debate. Is a community an extended network that individuals can call on for help, a complex weave of overlapping and intertwined networks, or is it a sense of common identification and collective solidarity? To avoid a rehash of such debates, it is more productive to focus on interactions rather than generic labels for those interactions (Komito, 1998, 2001; 2004 discusses this further.). New social media enables migrants to maintain contact with friends and relations who have remained behind, as well as those friends and relations who, like themselves, have left their home community. The accounts provided in this article indicate that social media, partly due to its “media rich” content and interactive capabilities, enables a common experience that supports a shared commitment and common identity, even though that experience is technologically mediated, all of which would be viewed, as reasonable characteristics of a community.

From Bridges to Bonds: Social Capital and Community

The first set of popular Internet applications facilitated social networking by linking people who only had brief connections or weak ties. These weak ties (Granovetter, 1973, 1982) have had major benefits for migrants, who use such ties to assist them as they move from one society to another. Some social media applications have been used in a similar way: people have friends on Facebook whose name or face is hardly known. However, social media can also reinforce strong ties (c.f., Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010), and the data from interviews suggests that social networking sites, combined with webcam use, instant messaging and texting all combine to enable people to still feel as if they are participating in their friends’ lives. Social media enables links of all types, whether the links are ‘strong’ ties, ‘weak’ ties, or somewhere between these two ideal types.

This focus on links between individuals is, to some extent, a reflection of the structure of Internet communications: nodes and links between nodes. Discussions of “networking individualism” come easily when communication is seen as a series of point to point contacts. There are, of course, other models for social life, and social capital is a view of human communication that focuses more on groups and links amongst groups (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Farr, 2004; Putnam, 2000). The earlier distinction between weak ties and strong ties can also be rephrased in terms of bridging versus bonding capital. Briefly, bonding capital focuses on strengthening collective membership within a group, while bridging capital links diverse groups (see Putnam, 2000 for a more elaborated definition). Some research has been done to examine the impact of social networking sites on bonding and bridging capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Social media can facilitate bridging capital (i.e., weak links between individuals who belong to different groups), but, in the case of migrants in Ireland, there is little evidence of the use of these technologies to facilitate integration into the host society. Even when social life takes place within Ireland, new technologies are used to facilitate social life amongst fellow Polish or Filipino nationals. In general, the various communication technologies support an ambient presence amongst migrants, and specifically used to maintain links amongst friends and relations (both within and outside Ireland); in other words, bonding capital. Checking photos, leaving comments, reading other people’s descriptions of their weekends are all ways of maintaining a low intensity level, ongoing participation in a community of affinity.

Migration, Integration and Community: the 'virtual migrant'?

Early discussions of changing communication patterns and the Internet largely focused on two issues: (1) easier and more efficient migration (involving not only first, but also subsequent migration) due to extended social ties and (2) the enhanced ability for individuals to participate in the culture and politics of cultures in which they grew up (web based forums, discussion groups, and so on). New social media applications support both processes; they make it even easier to maintain contact with individuals who may help in future relocations and these applications assist migrants in their efforts to maintain participation in a diasporic cultural identity.

However, this research data shows that social media also facilitates strong ties and bonding capital, and does so more effectively than earlier Internet applications. For migrants, this suggests a new manifestation of virtual communities. Initially, virtual communities were understood to be composed of individuals whose electronic interactions created a community with characteristics similar to traditional face to face communities, but this was seen to be a flawed comparison (Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004; Fernback, 2007; Komito, 1998, 2001; Postill, 2008). This new virtual community 2.0 is constituted by a low level ambient presence, or monitoring, that is similar to the background knowledge that exists in face to face communities, where people notice who is talking to who in a village meeting place, be it pub, coffee shop, market, or post office. This ambient or background awareness of others is a facility which has not been previously evidenced in the usage of Internet applications, and is characteristic of individuals who are members of social groups with a sense of solidarity and commonality. Some members of these virtual communities remain in the locality in which they grew up, while others have moved away and may continue to move from one location to another. New social media helps these individuals maintain a sense of continuity with each other and identification with the group as a well, regardless of where the members of the group live.

If the first wave of Internet applications helped extend personal networks and building bridging capital, this second wave of social media applications is, in addition, enhancing and supporting communities by contributing to bonding capital. Migrants are able to maintain contact with those who live remotely, and this may have a significant impact on migration processes. For instance, would the strong emotional support of a community provided by social media lessen the motivation for migrants to make social contacts in the society into which they have recently arrived? Will it make easier for migrants to move from one country to another, because the migrant can 'carry' his or her community of friends with them, while also provided easier access to advance information on new locations? Or, if they decide to return home, will it make it easier for migrant to re-integrate into their home society because they have not really left, in terms of social interaction and participation?

It is too early to gauge the impact that social media will have on the migration process, since many additional factors have to be taken into account (e.g., length of stay in host society, reasons for leaving the home society, commitment to remaining in the host society, subsequent movement to new localities). However, there is already evidence that the impact of social media practices on migration processes will be significant, as well as different from the impact of previous Internet applications. Migrants have the opportunity to be not so much 'connected migrants' (Diminescu, 2008) as 'virtual migrants': their physical locality can be irrelevant for their identity, as they continue to participate in the various dimensions of their home community, regardless of where they (or other people they grew up with) currently live. Not all migrants will opt for such a life, but for those who so desire, they can maintain the anchor of participation in a community of friends, relations, and acquaintances, regardless of the transient nature of their life.

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Footnotes:

[1] There has been much debate about whether this underestimates the population of non-Irish nationals but it is, at least, an indication of significant in-migration.

[2] Data collection, as of January 2011, is still ongoing.

[3] In the first phase, rural Polish were under represented, as were Filipinos without third level education; these groups were selected for interviews in subsequent interviews.

[4] The 31% figure for use of 'public' sources prior to arrival largely reflects the use by Filipinos of employment agencies to arrange legal employment before arrival. These employment agencies were usually also asked to provide general information about Ireland, and, if employment agencies are excluded, 'public' sources prior to arrival declines to 14%.

[5] Most frequently mentioned other kinship relations are son, daughter, parent, and spouse.

[6] Of course it is also the case that some respondents monitor others without either revealing themselves or posting any responses, but this is unusual.

[7] This use of 'ambient presence' resonates with terms such as 'peripheral social awareness' (Danah Boyd, http://www.zephoris.org/thoughts/archives/2009/08/16/twitter_pointle.html), 'ambient intimacy' (Leisa Reichelt, <http://www.disambiguity.com/ambient-intimacy/>), and 'co-presence' (Ito, Okabe, & Matsuda, 2005), all of which focus on the phatic functions of electronic communication. However, this use of 'ambient presence' draws attention to the information content of the communication and the shared sense of community that results from such content.

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