Virtually Local: social media and community amongst Polish nationals in Dublin

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Abstract: Purpose - This paper examines the impact of social media (including social networking technologies) on migration strategies and integration, focusing on the use of new technologies for information seeking and dissemination, as well as personal communication.
Methodology - Twenty-six Polish nationals resident in Ireland were interviewed, using semi-structured interviews, in 2008.
Findings - Results indicated a significant use of new social media, especially social networking technologies based in Poland and largely used by Polish language speakers. The use of social networking technologies enabled "media rich" and resilient social groups to develop, founded on the latent monitoring of activities characteristic of face-to-face, geographically delimited communities. The resulting social groups incorporated friends and relations based in Poland, Ireland and throughout the world. These networks tended to minimize integration into Irish society, as most Polish nationals interacted only with other Polish people, whether resident in Ireland or elsewhere.
Originality - This research demonstrates that new technologies are having a significant impact on patterns of migration. New social media are changing the character of international migration, with an emphasis on mobility rather than assimilation. Where foreign nationals previously tended to integrate into the societies where they resided, migrants are now more likely to be peripatetic mobile workers. Furthermore, while these migrants often no longer live in physical ghettos, they now live in "virtual" ghettos or enclaves, as they use new technologies to create separate lives within the wider society in which they work and live.
Keywords virtual community, social media, migration, transnational communities, Web 2.0, Ireland
Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Migration is not a new process in human societies, nor is the study of migration a new topic for academic investigation. However, in recent decades, the emergence of new technologies, leading to reduced communication costs and increased "richness" of communication, as well as decreased travel costs, have led to a reconsideration of migration theories. New technologies have enabled the emergence of transnational identities as a new factor in the traditional patterns of migration and integration, assimilation and/or diversity in host societies. It has been common to look at the persistence of ethnic and national identity, as well as the persistence (and also

creation) of social contacts, regardless of physical location. New technologies and reduced transportation costs are enabling migrants to maintain contacts and identification with their friends, family and home society, and the physical locality in which a migrant lives can, in some cases, become unintrusive background. According to a 2008 report published by the Immigrant Council of Ireland:

> …despite the distances, migrants keep in regular contact with family and friends through modern technology and visits home. Many, as a consequence, see themselves as belonging to at least two places and feel connected to their home countries as well as Ireland (The Migration and Citizenship Research Initiative UCD, 2008, p. 164).

New Information and Communications Technologies have often been central to the process of transnationalism. As Karim (2003) notes in his discussion of diasporic media, because of the special challenges they face in reaching their audiences, migrants are often on the cutting edge of technology adoption. Various applications of the Internet (e.g., email, websites) as well as mobile phones (especially SMS texting) have been explored as a means by which mobile migrants create and maintain location-independent information and communication flows. Recently, a new "wave" of Internet based applications has emerged, often described as "Web 2.0" or "social media": these Internet applications enable greater interaction between user and application through user generated content. This content is varied, and includes photographs, video, text comments, forming a media rich melange. Sites such as Bebo, MySpace, and Facebook have developed, where individuals can not only post a variety of different types of information on their own websites, but can also link their websites to those of their friends, thus the description of them as "social networking" applications. In a recent survey of new technology use, it was found that, out of all people who use social networking sites, 74 per cent use such sites to message friends (Universal McCann, 2008, p. 35). Of particular interest is their observation that, when comparing levels of social networking usage throughout the world, "emerging markets with high emigration lead the way", with the Philippines (83 per cent), Hungary (80 per cent), Poland (77 per cent) and Mexico (76 per cent) being the most significant. Thus, there would be good reason to expect the use of social networking sites to be high amongst migrant communities in Ireland.

One of the recurrent themes in discussions of virtual communities is the extent to which they can mimic "real" communities. Of course communities can be composed of individuals who communicate with each other via electronic and face-to-face communication. Slater and Tacchi (2004, p. 3) have talked about "communicative ecology", referring to the complete range of communication media and information flows within a community. New technologies have their place in the context of all the ways of communicating that are important locally, including face-to-face interaction. However, researchers are less certain about individuals whose primary interaction and communication is electronic, creating or maintaining virtual communities. This is of particular relevance to mobile migrants. In some urban areas, foreign nationals settle into particular locales and information flows and communicative exchanges take place through face-to-face interaction; the resulting sense of community has implications for ethnic identity and integration into the host society. When foreign nationals are dispersed throughout a city, such face-to-face interactions diminish, which makes it more difficult to create or maintain a sense of community or identity amongst the migrant population. Even though virtual communities may possess many elements

that enable them to function as communities, there is a richness that virtual communities lack and is very difficult to recreate. One aspect of this richness is akin to the difference between a live audience recording of music versus a studio production – there are background elements that seem unimportant, but can render the performance somewhat "dead". The background "noise" of a live concert supports the foreground of the music production. It can be argued the same is true of geographically defined communities: interactions between individuals are set in a background awareness of other people's activities and actions. In virtual communities there is the foreground of individual communication but the background is either absent or artificial.

Recently, attention has been drawn to the continued significance of the physical locality in the transnational process: the locality where foreign nationals have arrived, the locality from which foreign nationals have left and the problems of distance that technology does not remedy (Mitchell, 1997; Featherstone *et al.*, 2007). Featherstone and colleagues (2007, p. 385) emphasize that "trans-migrants are embedded in place, unable to escape their local context despite being 'transnational'". The relevance of new technologies in these local contexts are only beginning to be explored, as attention was previously focused on the impact of new technologies on international not local information and communication. Tyner and Kuhlke (2000, p. 241) suggest four useful spatial categorizations of diasporic Internet communications: intra-diasporic, inter-diasporic, diaspora-host and diaspora-homeland. In this context, it is the intra-diasporic level that is of interest, which includes websites and Internet communications by immigrants in their co-presence contexts of local communities. To what extent are new technologies used by foreign nationals, dispersed around an urban area rather than focused in enclave or ghetto communities, as a means of local as well as transnational elaborations of community?

New technologies often provide unexpected "affordances" as individuals and groups appropriate the technologies in new ways. One unexpected consequence of new technologies may be their ability to provide this sense of background communicative "noise" that is characteristic of geographically defined communities. Mizuko Ito and colleagues (2005) have discussed "ambient virtual co-presence", which they describe as "a way of maintaining ongoing background awareness of others, and of keeping multiple channels of communication open" (p. 264), in the context of mobile phones, and particularly the capacity for text messaging. This is an increasingly common phenomenon, especially amongst young mobile phone users; users keep in touch with friends via texting even while they are in different locations and in different social situations. However, this is still one-to-one communication, and it is synchronous, ahistorical interaction.

Polish nationals in Ireland

In 2006, the population of Ireland was about 4.17 million (Census 2006, http://www.census.ie/statistics/nationalityagegroup.htm). Of that, almost 420,000 (10.1 per cent) were non-Irish nationality. After UK nationals (112,000), the next largest nationality was Polish (63,276, equivalent to 1.5 per cent of the total population in Ireland). 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 numbers (required for employment) indicated 94,000 arrivals from Poland and 22,000 from the UK, the next largest country. Within the accession group in 2006, 67 per cent were Polish, 12 per cent Lithuanian, 8 per cent Slovakian, 6 per cent Latvian, with the remaining 7 per cent coming from the other six states (http://www.cso.ie/releasespublications/documents/labour_market/current/ppsn.pdf). The large number of Poles in Ireland has led to the provision of a number of media outlets catering to the Polish market, including the *Polska Gazeta* weekly newspaper and a section, once a week, in Dublin's *Evening Herald* entitled "Polski Herald". The significance of Polish immigration can be judged by the proliferation of Polish language advertisements, signs in shops and service providers, as well as the easy access to specialist Polish commodities such as consumables (e.g., food), greetings cards, and novels.

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 (36,464 out of 63,276), and nearly two-thirds were male. According to 2006 Census data, 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). However, as Barrett *et al.,* (2006, p. 2) note, "immigrants into Ireland have notably higher levels of education relative to the domestic population. … However, immigrants in Ireland are not employed in occupations that fully reflect their educational attainment."

It is also significant that this population is likely to be transient. According to the 2006 Census:

> …the rate of owner occupancy in households headed by Polish-born persons, who were usually resident here at the time of the 2006 census, was 4.9 per cent compared with nearly 80 per cent for those headed by Irish-born persons and 71.3 per cent for those headed by persons born in Britain. About three out of four households in which the head was born in Poland or Lithuania were private rented dwellings. The corresponding figures for African- and Asian-headed households were 56.3 per cent and 49.6 per cent, respectively.
> (http://www.cso.ie/census/census2006results/Volume_6/Vol6_Press_Release.pdf).

Thus, the Polish nationals in Ireland represent a large, but somewhat unrooted, population. With a recent slowdown in economic activity, this lack of financial investment in Ireland has enabled Polish workers to adapt quickly. Recently, it is thought that the number of workers from Eastern Europe (including Poland) has dropped by one-half, as existing workers have either returned to Poland for work or moved on to the Olympic Games inspired building boom in London (*Sunday Independent*, 2008). However, it is clear that a large number of Polish nationals remain in Ireland and, of those who live in Ireland, over half live in the greater Dublin area of Leinster. On this basis, it was decided to interview a number of Polish nationals living in the Dublin area regarding their use of new technologies.

Technology use

The survey asked a number of questions regarding individual's information and communication needs, patterns of social life, their use of new technologies, and their access to mass media information sources. Twenty-six individuals were interviewed, 15 female and 11 male, all but two in the age range of 25-44 years old. Just under one-third (30.8 per cent) had been in Ireland for one to two years, and over one-half (61.5 per cent) had been in Ireland for more than two years (the remainder had been in Ireland for less than one year). The occupations of those interviewed ranged from labourer to bookkeeper; as with males, manual labourers were somewhat under-sampled, half of the interviewees worked in the service industry (car park attendant, coffee shop assistant, domestic cleaner, labourer, night porter), and half were in specialised employment (teacher, bookkeeper, trainee architect, IT professional). Just over half had received a postgraduate qualification in Poland, regardless of their current employment in Ireland. One-third had excellent spoken English, although less reported excellent written English ability. The demographic spread of the sample is somewhat distorted, since a larger number of females were interviewed, as compared with the actual gender distribution of Polish nationals. According to the 2006 Census, there are 40 per cent females and 60 per cent males in the greater Dublin area, whereas there were 57.7 per cent females and 42.3 per cent males interviewed in the survey. These limitations were partly the result of funding restrictions, which limited the scope of sampling. However, there was only a minor significant difference between male and female interviewees in their usage of social networking sites (60 per cent of females versus 81.8 per cent of males used social networking sites), and the numbers were sufficient to suggest some other gender-based differences in social life.

Interviewees conformed to expectations regarding the significance of the Internet for people on the move: all interviewees, without exception, used the Internet, and most used it every day (all bar two had access at home and/or in the workplace, while the other two accessed the Internet in a public library and Internet café respectively). Some had used the Internet to get information about Ireland before coming to Ireland, but most came to Ireland because they knew someone in Ireland or had obtained a job through a recruiting agency or job advertisement before arriving. They browsed websites searching for information, used email to send messages and used Skype to talk to people. They used Gadu-Gadu (Polish for "chit-chat"; commonly known as GG or gg), which is a Polish instant messaging client, and over two-thirds (69.2%) accessed a social networking site. The most frequent social networking application used was "Nasza-Klasa" (Our Class), a large social networking platform in Poland, which organises participants in terms of former students from the same schools. People are able to keep and maintain a personal page containing information about their name, age, study subjects, interests and courses. Apart from many discussion forums it allows users to share photos, find cultural events in particular cities, sell property and find work. It does not require an invitation from one of the members to register. As a site, it is both popular (second in Poland in terms of traffic, according to www.alexa.com) and growing (the amount of traffic has risen by 220 per cent in the six month period ending May 2008). While most of the users of Nasza-Klasa come from Poland (82 per cent), Ireland ranks as fourth, with 2.5 per cent of users. This means that 14 per cent of all non-Polish accesses came from Ireland.

Nasza-Klasa is so popular in Ireland that, according to Alexa.com, it is the 11th most accessed Internet site for Irish Internet users (after sites such as Google, Yahoo, Bebo, Wikipedia, Facebook, and Blogger). It had more traffic than Allied Irish Banks (one of the two major banks in Ireland), RTE (the state television and radio station) or eBay. The strength of social networking in Ireland is also indicated by the high traffic for Orkut (a social networking site popular amongst the Brazilian diaspora) and Onet.pl. Onet is a Polish web portal, providing access to a Polish online encyclopaedia, a Polish version of Skype, and also providing email, web hosting, Usenet access, web forum and online chat services. Interviewees used a number of social networking sites; in addition to Nasza-Klasa, they often also used Facebook. However, they used Facebook only for their non-Polish speaking contacts. Contact with Polish speaking friends was through Nasza-Klasa.

Interviewees were asked to list six people who were important to them, in decreasing order of significance, and, for each person, to indicate who the person was, their nationality, their location, how they communicated with this person, how often they communicated, how long they had known the person, and their relationship to them (family member, friend, work colleague, etc.). In total, the 26 interviewees mentioned 152 individuals in this phase of the interview. The majority of people that the interviewees mentioned were Polish (125 people, or 82.2 per cent of the 152 total were Polish), and for these Polish contacts 58 (or 45.3 per cent of Polish contacts) lived in Poland, 53 (42.4 per cent) in Ireland, and 14 (13.2 per cent) elsewhere. This was similar to the findings from a recent report, published by the Immigrant Council of Ireland (The Migration and Citizenship Research Initiative UCD, 2008), of the migrant experiences of Chinese, Indian, Lithuanian and Nigerian migrants, which found that "migrants are most likely to spend time with people in similar situations, namely other migrants from their home country and elsewhere" (p. 133).

The interviewees used a variety of technologies to keep in contact with friends, whether in Dublin, Ireland, Poland or further afield. In addition to face-to-face contact, the most common technologically mediated strategies for contacting friends and family was the mobile phone, supplemented by texting, as well as Skype and email. Even when contacting friends who also lived in Dublin, there were a variety of modes used. As would be expected, it was rare that only one mode of communication was used to contact a friend, often two or three different modes were used interchangeably; the most common mode of contact was telephone calls (both mobile and landline) (67.1 per cent of individuals), face-to-face (43.4 per cent), email (25.7 per cent), Skype (21.7 per cent), mobile phone texting (18.4 per cent), instant messaging and SMS on the web (7.2 per cent) and other (3.3 per cent). Interviewees were also asked to rank from 1-5 their overall preferred methods of communications (for keeping in contact with friends) from a closed list, and the results were broadly similar. In rank order the interviewees preferred methods of communication were: face-to-face, mobile phone call, mobile phone text, email, Skype, instant messaging, face-to-face in a specific Polish location in Dublin, social networking website, and landline telephone call

Social networking and community: "just checking in"

In the interviews, it was clear that a distinction was drawn between face-to-face contact, phone, email and texting compared with social networking sites. During the

course of interviews, social networking websites were usually not mentioned by interviewees when they talked about how they kept in contact with friends and family (and in particular when they were asked about whom they had been in contact with over the previous week). This was surprising since the same interviewees responded positively when they were asked if they used social networking sites earlier in the interview. Rarely did they mention social networking sites as a means for socialising. Even though interviewees reported that they used social networking sites, often checking at least once a day and this was a central part of their life, they did not include this action within the category of "contacting friends or family", and instead referred to other modes of contact, such as phone calls, texting and email. When asked what they used the social networking site for, if not to contact their friends and family, they distinguished between actively contacting people and a more passive version of "keeping in contact". Most interviewees maintained this distinction between what might be seen as "active" and "passive" participation in social life. One interviewee said they used Facebook and Nasza-Klasa "for watching photos, leaving messages, like just saying hellos really". Another said, regarding the use that the interviewee's friends and family made of the social networking site:

> …they leave message, they comment my photos, I comment 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 enough to keep them, to make sure are all right and I am all right.

The interviewee further added:

> …my photo is a message, look this is what I do last week, this is my weekend, so people coming back and leaving notes, will think of yeah, I know what you did last weekend.

Both of these interviewees use the social networking sites for passive communication – they do not directly interact; it is closer to leaving notes on a bulletin board and seeing what notes others have left on the adjacent bulletin boards, or what notes have been added to their own bulletin board. Another interviewee is explicit about this distinction:

> I added some photos, I know they seen them because they left some comments, and I left, I replied to these comments, so I know they've been there, they know what I do, and they kind of follow my, what I've done last week, because I've made it kind of obvious by photos, but **I don't think you can call it contact though** (emphasis added).

This passive monitoring of activity rather than interactive communication was a common element in all the interviews. As another interviewee said:

> …sometimes I only check it and eh, without leaving anything. Just log in, log off and that's, okay I checked it, and there's nothing new coming up, and that okay.

These sites could become the basis for such communication, of course. As one interviewee said:

> I left them my email there and GG numbers, so if someone goes to contact me,

Another noted that they used Naaza-Klasa:

> …just to see the pictures of my friends, how they look now, I think that pictures are the most important, and then if I just want to contact them, just try to email them or just ring them on Skype because what you can on Nasza-Klasa, you can get their GG or Skype number or Skype nickname.

However, although the social networking sites could be a springboard for interactive communication, it is this "passive" communication that is particularly interesting. It provides the background "noise" of a shared record of multiple histories. This shared backdrop enables and supports a greater sense of community, through a shared knowledge of an array of individuals.

Another element in the use of social networking sites was its use for functions previously associated with email or phone calls. Both phone and email communication is a private communication between two individuals, written or spoken with the specific recipient in mind. Some interviewees used social networking sites for the same purpose as email – that is to communicate with specific individuals, often by leaving messages on their personal social networking site. Such messages may be intended for a specific person but they are public rather than private communications, or, more importantly, public within the restricted group of people who share access to the personal sites of individuals. This use of social networking sites as a means of personal but public communication is by no means unique to migrants; this sharing of "private" communication amongst a restricted public is common amongst users of social networking sites. A recent Pew Internet and American Life study found that, when asked to indicate the most popular methods of communicating with friends every day, social networking sites ranked 6th for most teenagers (after landline, mobile phone, face-to-face, instant message, and SMS texting), but 4th for teenagers who themselves were members of a social networking site (Lenhart *et al.*, 2007, p. 17). Furthermore, 41 per cent of teenagers in this survey who communicate with friends everyday do so by sending messages via a social networking site (p. 18).

In this context, when Polish interviewees indicated they left information on their social networking site for others to view, left messages on other people's sites, and viewed other people's sites, this is also in accord with other studies. The same Pew Internet and American Life project found that 84 per cent of teenager social network users post messages to a friend's page or wall, and 76 per cent post comments to a friend's blog. The study also found that nearly nine in ten teens who post photos online (89 per cent) say that people comment at least sometimes on the photos they post. Breaking it down, about half (52 per cent) of teens who post photos online say that people comment or respond to their photos "sometimes"; another third of those who post photos (37 per cent) say that their audience comments on their posted photos "most of the time" (p. ii-iii). As with email, this is public, but within a restricted group: "Few teens who upload photos online consistently share them without any restrictions. While 39 per cent say they restrict access to their photos "most of the time", another 38 per cent report restricting access "only sometimes" (p. iii).

However, it is teenagers who use social networking sites in this way. What about adult users? In 2006, while 55 per cent of online teens used social networking sites,

only 20 per cent of online adults used such sites and, in 2008, only 43 per cent of all US Internet users had created an online social networking profile (Universal McCann, 2008). This is a small percentage compared with the statistic of 77 per cent of all Polish Internet users who had created a profile. The interviewees in this Dublin research were adults, not teenagers: 100 per cent of interviewees used the Internet, and 69.2 per cent used social networking sites. It is clear that social networking is more significant for adult Polish nationals than adult US citizens. These patterns of social networking usage are more significant amongst migrant populations both because of the higher use of social networking applications amongst such groups, but also because of the nature of migrant online groups. Teenagers who use social networking sites often use it to supplement their face-to-face, "offline" social life; for migrants trying to maintain contact with friends in distant locations "online", the centrality of Internet use, in general, and social networking, in particular, has different consequences.

Social media and virtual community

One issue that arises in discussions of transnationalism and virtual community is the extent to which an electronic community can mimic "real" communities. One of the weaknesses of most virtual communities is their dependence on voluntary participation by members; this relative lack of commitment makes such communities vulnerable to conflict and fission (for detailed discussions of virtual communities, see Komito, 1998, 2001). Transnational communities based on common ethnic or national origin can be less subject to such vulnerabilities since members, *a priori*, share a common identification and, to at least some extent, a common identity and shared moral commitment. Members are more likely to have an emotional commitment to maintaining both the community as a unit and their membership in it. Of course, that would not prevent people moving from one ethnic/national group to another, similarly defined, ethnic/national group. Even when members share a common ethnic or national identity, the resulting virtual community may still seem a poor second to communities articulated through the face-to-face interaction of participants, supported by electronic mediating technologies such as telephone, texting, instant messaging and email.

Virtual communities possess many elements that enable them to function in the same way as face-to-face, geographically defined communities, but there is a richness that virtual communities lack and which is very difficult to recreate. One aspect of this richness is akin to the difference between a live audience recording of music versus a studio production – there are background elements that seems unimportant, but, when absent, render the performance somewhat "dead". The background "noise" of a live concert supports the foreground of the music production. It can be argued the same is true of geographically defined communities: interactions between individuals are set in a background awareness of other people's activities and actions. In virtual communities, there is the foreground of intentional, individual communication but the background "chit-chat" is either absent or artificial. In the context of migrants, one can easily imagine individuals whose shared biographies initially help them maintain a sense of common experience as they exchange information about current activities in their different localities. But, as time goes on, experiences diverge, and it becomes more and more difficult to maintain a sense of common experience. It is difficult and time consuming to provide others with a word picture of one's own experience;

inevitably, friends begin to drift apart as they have less and less to talk about that both are interested in.

At least, this has been the story until the advent of Web 2.0, in general, and social networking technologies, in particular. As is well known, Web 2.0 is a generic term used to describe a constellation of Internet applications that enable rapid and simple publication of user-generated content, in a wide variety of formats (e.g., text, picture, video) and enable these different types of information to be combined together (Vickery and Wunsch-Vincent, 2007; see also Komito, 2008). The use of earlier technologies (e.g., phone, email) to maintain contact across distances is well documented (e.g., Wilding, 2006); indeed Wilding points out constant communication "aided in generating a strong sense of shared space and time that overlooked – even if only temporarily – the realities of geographic distance and time zones" (p. 133) and, as previously noted, Ito and Okabe (2005) have discussed "ambient virtual co-presence" in the context of mobile phone texting.

New technologies often provide unexpected "affordances" as individuals and groups appropriate the technologies in new ways. For Polish nationals in Dublin, social networking technologies are enabling "co-presence" on a new scale. Interviewees indicated that they left information on their social networking site for others to view, left messages on other people's sites, and viewed other's sites. Rather than send private email messages, they sometimes leave messages that everyone who has access to the individual's page can read. The Polish nationals who used social networking sites in this survey used such sites to maintain links with friends, some of whom were also seen "offline", but many of whom were too far away to be seen face-to-face, except on rare occasions. Just over 46.7 per cent of interviewees saw any of their top six friends in a face-to-face context, and 53.3 per cent of the top six friends being contacted lived outside Dublin (over two thirds of them in Poland). Thus, for these Polish people living in Dublin, social networking practices link individuals who are distant and yet who wish to maintain contact with each other. A common comment would be:

> …you can put some picture there, and then whenever you log to this website then em, there are, it shows you up the new pictures which were put by friends last days, and then you can see what they are doing, how they look like, if they changed or how their children look like ... you can leave the comments under the picture.

The descriptions from all of these interviewees provided a similar picture: they checked for updated content from their friends, they entered comments on that content, they provided their own content, and read the comments others made on their content. These are the sorts of "conversations" that take place amongst any group of friends, as they keep track of each other's activities. The difference is that such multi-faceted and varied exchanges would not have been possible for geographically dispersed friends before social networking and all the media rich, user generated content that is part of Web 2.0.

It might be thought that interviewees whose friends lived in the Dublin area might be less likely to be users of social networking sites, since such friends are met "offline". Users of social networking sites indicated that 49.1 per cent of their top six friends lived in Dublin, while, for non-SSN users, 40.9 per cent of their top six friends lived

in the Dublin area. Thus, the physical location of one's friends had no impact on usage of social networking sites. This suggests that not only are social networking sites enabling virtual communities amongst people dispersed across distances, but these sites also serve a purpose for individuals within the same locality, albeit for individuals who share the same nationality.

The "passive" communication use of social networking sites reported by interviewees adds a new dimension to virtual communities. These practices provide the background context of active communication, a characteristic of "offline" communities that is now also available for online virtual communities. When friends read a message from each other, they have a rich context in which to interpret messages. They can see photos of recent activities, diaries of where friends went and who they saw, videos of parties, links to other activities in the locality, and so on. Thus, the interviewee that reported that she "... just log in, log off and that's, okay I checked it" is engaged in a constant monitoring which is far more than the "virtual co-presence" that texting enables. This background monitoring becomes the context of text or email messages, a context that makes such messages more meaningful and enables a rich biography of shared lives to develop. The combination of "media rich" content, with interactive comments ("I will leave the comment under the picture"), and constant monitoring of new content provides the basis for an enduring sense of common experience that will continue to support shared commitments and common identity characteristic of communities.

Implications

This growth of "media dense", media sharing, interactive virtual communities can be expected to have an impact on migration patterns. There has been a presumption that, with chain migration, people go to where they already have contacts. The cost and risk of going to a new place, without contacts, militates against migration. Poros (2008, p. 1618), for instance, commented in a recent article that "...lack of ties leads to little or no migration because international migration is costly and risky". But, with new technology, the information deficit is gone and contacts may be made in advance of travel, so risk and cost no longer prevent migration. Potential migrants have access to information about Ireland and contacts with Polish people in Dublin, prior to arrival. In effect, these potential migrants can join a local virtual community before even arriving in Dublin. Of course, having virtually joined a community in advance of arrival, they will then, after arrival, participate in that community "offline" through face-to-face interaction. The data from this pilot study does not address this question of changing migration patterns due to new virtual communities, since the majority of interviewees have been in Ireland for more than one year, and more than half had been in Ireland for more than two years. This predates recent surges in usage of social networking sites. For instance, Nasza-Klasa, the most significant social networking site for Polish users, only developed since the end of 2006. Therefore, it is not surprising the migration patterns of those who have been in Ireland between one and two years tended to follow traditional patterns. Even so, 38.5 per cent had obtained information about Ireland over the Internet before their arrival. Furthermore, in terms of current access to websites, half of the interviewees listed a Polish based website as their most frequently visited site, and virtually all interviewees listed a Polish based site as one or two of the top three most visited websites (the most frequently mentioned Polish website was onet.pl).

With the increased significance of social networking sites and other Polish based Web 2.0 sites, the nature of community that is emerging and future migration strategies based on participation in these communities may be expected to be quite different. These different strategies will not only mean that migrants may be more likely to go to new countries without advance contacts but, even more significantly, it is going to increase the chances for future mobility. That is, instead of Polish migrants in Ireland returning to Poland when economic or personal circumstances in Ireland become difficult, they are likely to find it easier to move on to new locations. There has already been a significant shift of Polish workers from Ireland to London, in order to take advantage of economic opportunities in advance of the London Olympics in 2012. Such movement becomes much easier when personal contacts are easier to maintain across geographical distances and when advance information about the intended destination is easily available. In this context, it is intriguing that interviews revealed some interesting gender differences in terms of social contact. For females, 83.7 per cent of their top six friends were Polish, the figure was slightly lower for males (80.3 per cent of males listed Polish people in their top six). Furthermore, males were less likely to have friends who lived in Poland (30.3 per cent vs. 44.2 per cent). For males, 51.6 per cent of their friends lived in Dublin, compared to 43.0 per cent of the friends of the females in the study. Males also had a larger percentage of friends who resided in neither Poland or Dublin (18.2 per cent versus 12.8 per cent for females). The findings from this study suggest that male Polish nationals maintain a wider set of friends, in terms of both nationality and geographical location. This undoubtedly facilitates mobility, as evidenced by anecdotal reports of Polish nationals going to building sites in London. New technologies are enabling a more mobile and transient society, but one composed of individuals who find it ever easier to maintain contacts with friends and family as well as their own national or ethnic identity.

These changes can also be expected to have serious consequences for patterns of integration. What is emerging is a pattern of migration in which foreign nationals are less dependent on economic and social success in the localities in which they have arrived. Economically, it is easy to move on to new locations, and there is less incentive to ride out difficult economic circumstances in their current locality, and male Polish nationals are even more likely to have a diverse set of friends that make such strategies successful than female nationals. There is also less incentive to make contact with native English speakers, since they are more likely to view their residence in Ireland as temporary and strategic. Social networking sites can provide them with a emotional buffer. In so far as loneliness would have previously increased their motivation to socialize with those who they live near, now they can maintain contact with friends and family electronically. Just "checking in" gives them a sense of continued participation in their previous social life. This "passive" monitoring reduces some of the motivation for foreign nationals to integrate into their host societies. Despite some gender differences reported earlier, the evidence is clear that Polish nationals in Dublin are more likely to be friends with fellow Polish nationals. When interviewees were asked to list their six top friends, 82.2 per cent of the friends listed were Polish nationals, while only 4.6 per cent were Irish citizens. With such minimal contact with Irish citizens, even when living in Ireland, it is clear that twenty-first century migration is mobility not assimilation, and new social networking technologies are facilitating this mobility. Where foreign nationals previously tended to integrate into the societies where they resided, migrants may now be peripatetic mobile workers. Furthermore, while these migrants may no longer live in physical

ghettos, since they reside in dispersed locations in cities, they now live in "virtual" ghettos or enclaves, as they use new technologies to create separate lives within the wider society in which they work and live.

Note

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