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Migrants' information practices and use of social media in Ireland: networks and community

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ABSTRACT

Migrants, having left their home society and community, often depend on electronic modes of communication to maintain contacts with distant friends and relations. Their practices illustrate the affordances provided by social media when face to face communication is not available. This paper describes the information and communication practices of Polish and Filipino nationals in Ireland, based on interviews with over sixty-five migrants in 2009. Migrants display increased dependence on the Internet as an information source and use various electronic media to maintain significant contacts with friends and relations in their home societies. Social media (including Web 2.0) practices have an impact on long distance relations that previous technologies have not had, due to differences in the way these technologies are utilized. Social media usage is a passive monitoring that complements the active communication of first generation technologies; this monitoring creates a background awareness and presence in terms of which active communication takes place, which facilitates bonding as well as bridging capital. This enables resilient and durable transnational links, while also facilitating greater mobility for migrants.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.4.2 [Social Issues]

General Terms

Human Factors

Keywords

social media, virtual communities, migration, information seeking, bonding capital, web 2.0, transnationalism, social inclusion, Ireland

1. INTRODUCTION

The impact of new technologies on long distance social relations has attracted both research and debate. Debates have focused on both the kind of social relations that such technologies enable, and the consequences of such technological mediated relationships for broader social transformations. The paper reports on the first phase of a two year research project examining the use

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of social media and other communication technologies by migrants in Ireland. The research, based on interviews with sixty-five migrants (34 Polish and 31 Filipino nationals) living in Ireland, examines their use of information and communications technologies (focusing especially on social media) and its impact on information seeking practices and patterns of social relations. It suggests that the use of social media by migrants enables strong ties to be maintained over long distances, in contrast to the weak ties enabled by earlier information and communications technologies. The consequences, for the migration process, of such strong ties may be to reduce the amount of participation by migrants in the societies in which they reside and encourage greater onward mobility for migrants.

2. RESEARCH ON MIGRATION, NEW TECHNOLOGIES, AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

In debates about the impact of new information and communications technologies on communication and information dissemination, it is accepted that most people combine various communication modes (face to face, mobile phone, email) in their ongoing contacts with friends and relations [e.g., 1, 2-4]. Individuals use multiple communication modes to maintain a variety of personal and collective relationships; increasingly, researchers suggest that the term 'virtual community' is vague, with little analytic value, and the distinction between 'virtual' and 'real' life is neither useful or accurate [5-10]. However, there are situations in which physical separation dictates that people must depend on new technologies to communicate. Research on these situations has tended to focus on maintaining national or community identification [11-13], relations of kinship [14-16], and 'weak ties' of friendship [17, 18]. There has been less research on the capacity of new technologies to support dispersed relations of affinity and community. This intermediate level of social life, between the micro relations of kinship and macro relations of nationality and ethnicity, is an area for more detailed research.

Migration provides an excellent area for this research on the impact of new technologies on long distance social relations. It is widely accepted that the nature of migration has been transformed by the facility for new technologies to enable migrants to maintain contacts with the society and community which they have left [19-21]. This use of new technologies by migrant groups is hardly surprising; young, male, middle-class Americans have a reputation as fervent early users of technology, but, as Stefana Broadbent noted, in a widely quoted article in the technology

quarterly section of *The Economist*, “migrants, rather than geeks, ... have emerged as the ‘most aggressive’ adopters of new communications tools” [22].

Caidi and colleagues [23, 24] have been looking at the information practices of immigrants in Canada, and they find that ICTs are altering the migrant experience. According to Caidi [24], ICTs are “changing the nature and frequency of migrants’ contacts with source countries ... [and] providing new types of cultural consumption and production.” Caidi also cites a Canadian Internet Project report that states that those who have migrated to Canada spend more time online than those living in Canada that were born there. Karim [25] 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. These individuals have left the community and society in which they grew up and with which they may wish to maintain contact, yet they live, either permanently or temporarily, in locations too distant for frequent face to face contact. As noted, research has been exploring how these new technologies are incorporated in migrants’ practices in order to maintain kinship contacts and participate in long distance nationalism and ethnicity. It is less clear whether migrants use social media and other electronic technologies to retain links with individuals in their home society and participate in dispersed communities. If this is the case, then new technologies are actually contributing to the ‘death of distance’ [26], whether in terms of ‘networked individualism’ [27-31], or ‘virtual communities’ [9, 10, 32, 33].

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper reports on an ongoing study of the use of social media and other information technologies by non-nationals in Ireland; specifically, citizens of Poland and the Philippines currently living in Ireland. The study is an extension of a pilot study undertaken 2008, in which 26 Polish nationals were interviewed [34]. The current study is a two year longitudinal study of both Polish and Filipino nationals. Sixty-five nationals have been interviewed (with two subsequent interviews of the same individuals to take place during 2010). The study explores their information needs and search strategies, as well as their patterns of communication and social interaction, both locally and transnationally.

Nationals from Poland and the Philippines were chosen for a number of reasons. First, in general, “emerging markets with high emigration lead the way” in terms of use of social media, and the nationality that was most engaged was the Philippines, with 83.1% of active Internet users having created a profile on a social network site, followed by 79.9% of active Internet users in Hungary, and 76.8% in Poland [35]. Second, both groups are present in Ireland in relatively large numbers. The 2006 Irish census shows that there were 63,276 Poles in Ireland (out of a total population of 4.4 million, and probably a significant underestimate), and 9,644 nationals from the Philippines in Ireland [36]. Third, in both groups there are people employed in manual as well as professional occupations. Finally, the groups differ in their work entitlements: Polish nationals, as EU citizens, can work and move as they wish, while Filipinos require work permits; this difference enables useful comparisons, since it also leads to different work and residential strategies on the part of nationals.

In the first phase of the study, respondents were interviewed by research assistants, using a semi-structured interview schedule. Interviews lasted about 1 to 1 1/2 hours; two-thirds of the questions were closed questions with restricted choice; the other third were either short answer or open-ended questions. The interviewers encouraged the respondents to expand their answers, so as to obtain narratives whenever possible. 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 into English. Respondents were recruited through word of mouth, friends of friends, or opportunistic approaches, and most did not know each other. When selecting respondents for interview, effort was made to match the demographic characteristics of Polish and Filipino nationals in Ireland, especially in terms of social class, gender and residence (urban versus rural). 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. Data from closed questions were input in an SPSS file for statistical analysis. Answers to open-ended questions were transcribed and analyzed using anthropological methods of ethnographic interpretation [37-40], similar to the grounded theory method followed in other social science disciplines [41, 42].

4. RESULTS

4.1 Information prior to arrival

Respondents were asked how well informed they were about living and working in Ireland before coming to the country. The responses were evenly split: half were either quite well or very well informed, and half had either little or no information prior to their arrival.

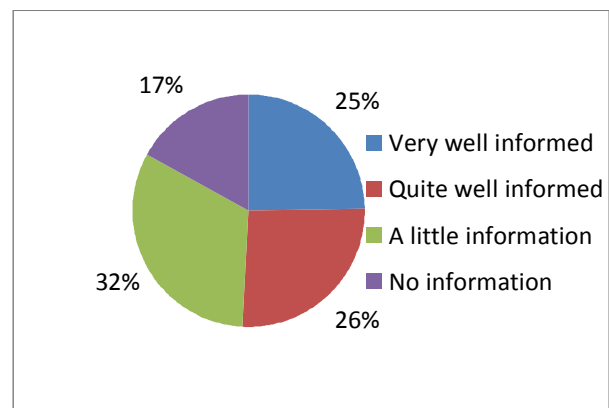


Figure 1. How informed respondents were about living and working in Ireland before arrival

There was little difference between the two migrant groups when it came to how informed they were prior to coming to the country. Having family already in Ireland also did not seem to be a

significant factor – for those that were quite well or very well informed it was often through these family members, however there were also those who came to the country with little or no information and who had family members here, which could be because they felt that they did not need to gain prior knowledge or information as their family members could help with information once they arrived. Spoken English ability, level of educational attainment, and social class also had no significant bearing on how well informed (or otherwise) participants were before coming to the country. The study has found that females were slightly better informed than the males before arriving in Ireland. While how long a person had been in the country did not have any impact on the extent to which they sought information prior to arrival, the length of time they planned to stay did seem to be a factor. The longer a person planned to stay, the more likely that they were quite well, or very well informed about living and working in Ireland before they came.

As might be expected, all respondents exhibited high levels of technology usage:

- 95% use Internet
- 95% own laptop or PC
- 94% Polish respondents who use Skype or other VoIP application
- 52% Filipino respondents who use Skype or other VOIP application¹
- 92% have home broadband
- 80% own a webcam

The significance of these percentages is clear when compared to national findings for Irish residents in similar age groups: 83% in the 25-34 age group and 76% in the 35-44 group use the Internet, while 77% in the 25-34 age have home broadband [43]. Most significantly, according to a market research group, only 18% of the adult population uses Skype [44], in contrast to the 74% users in the study. Both Polish and Filipino migrants are avid and efficient users of new communications technologies, especially Skype and webcams, and as we will see below, social network sites.

4.2 Information Sources

Migrants are fervent users of technologies, but for what purposes? Seeking information about living in Ireland was one use. When asked what information migrants needed, they indicated the following:

- 48% Tax issues
- 45% Employment issues (obtaining employment, employment rights)
- 32% Social welfare
- 23% Obtaining a government registration number (for tax, social welfare)
- 20% Accommodation
- 22% Health entitlements

Other information needs included transport and travel, banking, cost of living in Ireland, shopping, entertainment and leisure, and information needs relating to children (schools, citizenship).

¹ Fewer Filipinos use Skype/VoIP because contacts live in rural areas without Internet availability and are contacted by phone.

They used a variety of sources to get such information, both electronic and human. Participants were asked to list the information sources they used in Ireland, the sources they had used to get information about Ireland before arriving, and the sources they would use if they were going to move to a new locality. They could list as many sources as they wished.

Table 1. Information sources in Ireland

9%	Internet only
20%	Internet and friends/relations
35%	Internet (only or with any other sources)
43%	Friends/family (only or with any other sources)
14%	Friends/family only (without any other sources)
49%	Public (only or in addition to other sources) ²

As Table 1 indicates, the Internet is widely used by respondents as an information source: thirty-five percent used the Internet (alone or in combination with other sources), and 43% used family and friends (alone or in combination with other sources), and nearly half use newspaper, radio, television, or government offices for information. The use of the Internet, compared with family or friends, differs from the frequency of sources they reported having used in order to get information about Ireland prior to their arrival (Table 2).

Table 2. Information sources prior to arrival to Ireland

11%	Internet only
11%	Internet and friends/relations
31%	Internet (only or with any other sources)
61%	Friends/family (only or without any other sources)
28%	Friends/family only (without any other sources)
31%	Public (only or in addition to other sources)

This use of friends or family as information sources prior to arrival in Ireland conforms with most research on the migration process, which is often described as chain migration (going to where the migrant already knows someone). Since many migrants go where they already know someone, the reliance on family or friends as an information medium is not surprising. In that context, however, the decreased use of friends or family after arrival (down from 61% to 43%) is intriguing, since those same family and friends could be expected to still be available to the migrants. The use of ‘public’ sources 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 declines to 14%.

When asked how they would get information if they were to leave Ireland for a third country (Table 3), the significance of friends or

² ‘public’ includes sources such as newspapers, television, radio, employment agencies and government agencies, all of which are impersonal, authoritative, and which enable the migrant to remain anonymous.

family decreased further to 25%, while the significance of the Internet rose from 31% to 73%.

Table 3. Information sources if moving from Ireland

30%	Internet only
14%	Internet and friends/relations
73%	Internet (only or with any other sources)
25%	Friends/family (only or with any other sources)
11%	Friends/family only (without any other sources)
19%	Public (only or in addition to other sources) ³

There is clear evidence of a trend away from friends and family and to the Internet as a source of information. Why would migrants be more likely to use the Internet as an information source if they were going to move elsewhere? Do their friends and relations not possess relevant information? Or, having arrived in Ireland, they do longer have access to those knowledgeable friends and relations and so must depend on alternative information sources? In other words, have the kinship and friendship relations of migrants atrophied since they came to Ireland?

4.3 Sociability and Technology

Patterns of migrants' personal support can be detailed through social network analysis [45-49]. To map their ego-centred networks, migrants were asked to list "6 friends or people who are important to you (wherever in the world they are), in descending order of importance" and were then asked a number of questions about each person (including nationality, relation to respondent, place of residence, and how often they were contacted). Ninety-four percent of top six individuals mentioned by Polish nationals are Polish, and 88% of top six individuals mentioned by Filipino migrants are Filipino. Finding that migrants tend to value, as close contacts, fellow nationals is not a surprise. A report by the Immigrant Council of Ireland [50] on experiences of Chinese, Indian, Lithuanian and Nigerian migrants reported that "migrants are most likely to spend time with people in similar situations, namely other migrants from their home country and elsewhere". In the current study, 65% of Polish reported that they mixed "mainly with fellow Polish", while 52% of Filipinos mixed "mainly with fellow Filipinos". In many cases, poor knowledge of English restricts social opportunities, but, in any event, even when there is some social contact outside of the respondent's ethnic group, these contacts are perceived to be superficial rather than significant.

Social events usually took place at weekends, 56% of Polish respondents saw fellow nationals at least once a week, while 68% of Filipinos saw fellow nationals at least once a week. For Filipino nurses, the high degree of socializing with fellow Filipinos is understandable: they see each other in the same hospitals, and are likely to live in the same houses, near the hospitals. However, this does not apply to Filipinos who are employed in other occupations; nor does it apply to Polish migrants, who are more likely to be scattered through the urban locality. To circumvent

³ "Public" sources is 19% because Filipino participants use employment agencies if moving to another country. Excluding employment agencies reduces "public" sources to 6%.

dispersed residence, they, like many teenagers, organize their leisure time largely through mobile phones (both phone calls and text messaging) as well as, in some cases, social networking sites [c.f., 2, 51].

4.4 Friendship and distance

If the nationality of respondents' most significant contacts is not a surprise, the location of those contacts is. In an earlier pilot study [34], only 42% of the six most significant contacts of Polish migrants lived in Ireland. Forty-five percent of contacts lived in Poland and 13% lived in neither Ireland nor Poland. The current study (Table 4) reveals a similar pattern.

Table 4. Location of residence for top six contacts

	'home'	Ireland	Elsewhere
Polish	46%	48%	7%
Filipino	47%	36%	17%

While the number of Ireland resident contacts increases for those who have stayed in Ireland for over five years, the number of 'home' contacts remains constant.⁴ Overall, about 58% of significant contacts for all respondents live outside of Ireland. The significant percentage of non-local 'significant contacts', even amongst individuals in Ireland more than five years, is intriguing, especially in conjunction with 90% of Polish and 100% of Filipinos who indicate that they keep in touch with people 'back home'. Kinship might be part of the explanation for this; links with close family would be expected to endure, even in the absence of webcams and Skype. Indeed, kinship is a major component of top six contacts for both groups; 53% of six contacts for Polish respondents and 66% of six contacts for Filipino respondents are linked by kinship. For both groups, mothers and sisters are the most frequently mentioned. Overall, the first ranked contact likely to be a kin relation (91%), even though only 49% of those first ranked contacts actually live in Ireland. The strength of kinship norms may explain the persistence of the long distance contacts for the top ranked contact: strong kin relations persist despite long distances and infrequent contacts. However, the situation changes when looking at lower ranked contacts: 64% of 6th ranked contacts are not kin relations of the respondent. Examining those six ranked contacts who are not related by kinship, over half of them (54%) live outside Ireland. In other words, migrants are maintaining affective contact with friends over long distances and the norms of kinship can not account for these long-distance social contacts. Is it possible that new technologies contribute to the survival of long distance relations that might otherwise be expected to atrophy over time?

4.5 Social Media

An indication of why long distance relations continue to be salient may be seen from the descriptions provided by respondents of their use of social media. All respondents were asked to describe their typical actions when they access a social networking site. Here are three typical descriptions, from Polish migrants, of their use of social networking sites:

⁴ The increase in 'host' contacts is at the expense of contacts who reside in neither home nor host societies.

“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.”

“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.”

“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”

Similar accounts are provided by Filipinos:

“Well, for Friendster, on my off so every two days or every three days. ... we post pictures there so um, we post pictures and I get to see my friends photos as well and then I would know how well they’re coping, how well they’re doing with their job and all that, wherever they are...”

The significance of social media sites emerges when Polish and Filipino respondents discuss their use of social networking applications. In descriptions from both groups, a few verbs appear consistently in descriptions: browse, check, and peep. They ‘*browse*’ photos of their friends, they ‘*check*’ the social networking sites of friends, and they ‘*peep*’ at friend’s activities. Unlike the active usage of email and Skype, in which individuals directly communicate with each other, descriptions of social networking practices exhibit a passive ‘monitoring’ of friends which enables migrants to be aware of friends’ activities without requiring that they actively engage with these friends. For many respondents, being able to browse current photographs of friends’ activities is particularly significant.

Another feature that emerged from respondents’ descriptions of their use of social media sites was frequent, but short duration, access to the sites. Unlike some users who might use social media sites like Facebook for hours at a time, these respondents tended to check sites long enough to see if anything had happened since their last visit, and then left the site. This was sufficient to maintain a background awareness of friends’ activities. These friends tended to be ‘weak’ rather than ‘strong’ ties [52], and this low level awareness of a wider community complemented the active usage of phones and email for one-to-one communication for close contacts.

4.6 News and identity

A different indication of transnational linkages is interest in news programs. Migrants’ interest in news programs (Irish versus Polish/Filipino) is an indication of identity and integration; those who are most integrated into Irish life and in the process of redefining their ethnic identification (i.e., from Polish to Polish-Irish or Filipino to Filipino-Irish) would be less likely to monitor home news. However, as Table 5 indicates, there is no increased preference for Irish news as duration of stay in Ireland lengthens. If anything, interest in Irish news seems to decrease marginally. This might mean an increased sense of security and therefore less concern with monitoring Irish news.⁵

⁵ This decrease may not be significant, given the relatively small number of cases involved.

Interestingly, there is an indication that interest in both ‘home’ and ‘host’ news decreases as length of stay in Ireland increases, for both groups, which may indicate a decreased participation in a delocalized national identity (i.e., neither Polish, Filipino or Irish).

Table 5. Migrants, by length of residence in Ireland, who monitor Irish and Polish/Philippines news

	Irish news	‘home’ news
Polish <2 yrs	100%	100%
Polish 2-5 yrs	95%	70%
Filipino <2 yrs	100%	65%
Filipino 2-5 yrs	100%	91%
Filipino >5 yrs	92%	75%

5. DISCUSSION

The decreased interest in Polish and Filipino news suggests that both Polish and Filipino nationals in Ireland identify less with their home societies the longer they stay in Ireland. However, this decreased identification with national identities contrasts with continued participation in transnational social contacts. The implications of these findings are intriguing; if migrants maintain social contacts with individuals dispersed through the world, while feeling less involved in the activities of the society in which they grew up, this alters our understanding of migration. It suggests that such individuals are less likely to integrate into their host society, since they are able to maintain transnational relations of affective significance. Yet, since they are less involved in the imagined community of the nations in which they grew up, they are more likely to remain transient, moving from one country to another without either returning to the society in which they grew up or integrating into the society in which they currently reside. Evidence further suggests that, during their stay in Ireland, migrants acquire the confidence and competence to get information about any future moves from the Internet. This is not as a response to reduced personal contacts (since those contacts endure), but exist as a complement to trans-national personal contacts. If it is easier to obtain information about other places to live and work, the opportunity cost of relocation is reduced. This, combined with the ability to maintain significant contacts at home, indicates they do not have to feel isolated even if they move. New technologies may encourage the emergence of peripatetic mobile workers who, like mobile capital, move as opportunities present themselves. It is intriguing, for instance, that a high number of respondents came to Ireland with little or know prior information, perhaps due to perceived ease of ‘finding what they needed to know’ once they arrived.

The durability of long distance contacts is contributing to this increased mobility and transience on the part of migrants, and the use of various technologies, including e-mail, Skype, and webcams have all contributed to this increased durability. While many of these technologies are either not new (i.e., email) or elaborations of previously utilized communication modes (i.e., Skype), new social media emerges as a technology which facilitates durable contacts, in ways that previous technologies could not. Social media enables a passive ‘monitoring’ of friends which enables migrants to be aware of friend’s activities without requiring that they actively engage with these friends. Even activities such as monitoring photographs of friends’ and

relations' activities provides a background context that enables an enduring co-presence that is more effective than mobile phone texting [c.f., 53]. While earlier media enabled the 'connected' migrant [54] to use email, Skype and other active forms of communication to maintain one-to-one contacts, social media facilitates a 'virtual' migrant who remains a participant in previously existing groups which do not atrophy even though members disperse. The durability of non-kin social links illustrated by the residence patterns of the six 'significant contacts' may be accounted for by the descriptions that emerged of how migrants use social media to maintain a 'watching brief' over friends. Some migrants even reported that information circulated amongst friends when photographs and information about mutual friends was made available via social networking sites. Due to that nature of electronic communication, 'virtual communities' that mimic the bonds of affect and solidarity associated with face to face communities have often been dismissed as unlikely [5, 9, 10]. However, social media may be changing the nature of technologically-mediated relationships, enabling durable bonds that will be more resilient and less subject to disruption than was previously the case.

Evidence from this study indicates that new technologies enable migrants to maintain trans-national social links with fellow nationals in their home societies. This is achieved using a variety of technologies, but the use of social media by migrants adds a new dimension to these links. The ability to passively monitor the activities of friends, in addition to active communication modes such as Skype and email, enables more durable and long-lasting relationships, including relationships not supported by norms and values of kinship. These contacts reduce isolation and so decrease the motivation to integrate into the migrant's host society. The increase in Internet skills of migrants is not a response to reduced personal contacts, but complements pre-existing contacts which continue to be maintained.

Transnational contacts, combined with enhanced technological skills, enhances the mobility of migrants and may lead to a significant change in migration patterns. No longer will migrants move from home to another society and either stay or return home; it is now more likely that they will move on to third or further locations. Most significantly, the use of social media enables continued participation in previously existing collectivities or communities, and these communities do not atrophy as members disperse throughout the world. Virtual communities, which previously were difficult to create and maintain, are now more resilient and durable, due to the integration of new social media into everyday communication and information practices. The consequence is that, paradoxically, migrants are becoming more mobile while remaining tethered, virtually, to their home social life.

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