10 Staying in Touch with My Mobile Phone in My Pocket and Internet in the Cafés

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INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I explore the lives of migrants and how they have been transformed by the availability of ubiquitous access to mobile phones and the Internet in their new place of residence. This present study draws on 10 years of my own research of mobile phone and information and communications technologies (ICT) users in the UK (Vincent, 2010; Vincent & Harper, 2003) and on my further studies with international scholars exploring migration and diaspora in global societies (Fortunati, Perttierra, & Vincent, 2012). In combining this research, I aim to show how this increased global access to mobile phones and the Internet, during the last decade in particular, has transformed the relationships between migrants and their left-behind families and friends, as well as with their commercial and business links. In the past, bidding farewell to a family member about to embark upon a new life in another town or country many miles away could be a traumatic experience with no certainty of when, if ever, they would be heard of again. Today, with a mobile phone and an email address in their pocket, the separation between migrant and their family, friends, and business contacts need only be one merely of physical location: almost everyone can now be immediately contactable at the press of a key. Furthermore, communications media exist that enable always-on, person-to-person contact via voice, text, or video, as well as many other forms of connectivity such as satellite television, Internet sites, and news media.

It has not always been easy to access mobile phones: the availability of low-cost, prepay mobile phones without contracts and free Wi-Fi have been turning points in the mass adoption of these technologies, and this is especially important to people who are visiting or migrating to another country. Until the late 1990s, in the UK as well as in most other countries, it was not possible to buy a mobile phone subscription, or indeed a subscription to any communications service, unless you had a permanent address of more than 6 months’ residency and a bank account in the country where you were buying the service. Consequently, new migrants to the UK, as well as many UK citizens, could not obtain personal telecommunications services and instead
had to rely on public payphones or, if in employment, their work phones and Internet. Since the millennium, access to mobile communications—voice, text, and the Internet—has become much more widely available, and it is perhaps not a coincidence that transnational diasporas linked by mobile media rather than by physical colocation are becoming more prevalent.

The chapter begins with a discussion of theoretical approaches to migration and leads into an overview of the development of various ICTs explored from the perspective of mobility and migration. It then looks at how migrants have maintained contact with those they left behind, considering, at the same time, the emotional aspects of communicating and keeping in touch when apart. Emotion is a facet of migration that must often be confronted and, as discussed, both the mobile phone and Internet access are important enablers for its management. The chapter is illustrated with examples from research conducted by contributors to various COST Actions and in particular from the edited volume on migration and diaspora in global societies (Fortunati, Perttierra, & Vincent, 2012b).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

It is notable that, until very recently, there have been few studies exploring migrant communities and their use of information communications technologies. During the last decade, mobile phone and wireless Internet use has burgeoned, and there is a growing body of research exploring the use of media by transnational families and diasporas, including some studies on their mobile phone and Internet use. Early studies of mobile phone users had highlighted the perpetual connectivity the phones afforded (Katz, & Aakhus, 2002) as well as the close relationship between human beings and machines that it involves (Katz, 2003). These studies were preoccupied with understanding the new social practices emerging from the use of mobile phones and the Internet. There were, however, fewer studies that explored cultural differences and the use of ICTs by migrant communities in particular. Notable exceptions are the international studies by SOCQUIT and a number of studies within COST Actions 248, 269, 298 and IS0960 (Fortunati, Perttierra, & Vincent, 2012b; Georgiou, & Ponte, 2013; Haddon, 1997, 2005, 2011).

Global infrastructure that supports international travel and offers ubiquitous fixed-line communications service has been available for several decades now, but it was perhaps the arrival of international roaming mobile phone services and wireless Internet that has facilitated regular and immediate communication across populations anywhere in the world. Migrations of mass populations such as those that occur in times of crises—war, famine, religious persecution—have been recorded for millennia. While some of the migrants in the studies referred to herein are indeed refugees from ravaged countries and communities, the majority are migrants by choice. They move to join family or to forge a new life elsewhere in search of adventure, money,
work, and so on; there are many reasons a person becomes an immigrant. The outcome of this mass of individual migrations has been the development of new transnational societies. This notion of transnationalism has been studied by numerous scholars and is defined by Basch, Glick Schiller, and Blanc-Szanton (1994): "as the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (p. 6). Portes (1997) posits that new communities that have emerged as a response to the process of globalization are centered on the friends and families of the migrants; these may not necessarily be located in the same place or country as they "create communities that sit astride political borders and that, in a very real sense, are 'neither here nor there' but in both places simultaneously" (p. 3). Combining this concept of transnationality with those of "no sense of place" and "glocality" explored by Meyrowitz (1983, 2005) one finds new societies with changing spatial and temporal patterns that are further influenced by their use of electronic media. Furthermore, owing to the intervention of these media, boundaries are ignored through cross-border communications and mobility and, as a result, private, and public behaviors become blurred.

In establishing their new lives, migrants are also heavily reliant on the building of social trust and the collaboration of strangers (Putnam, 2000). This is a further strand in sustaining these floating or nomadic communities, and it is in this regard that mobile phones especially can be considered "a tool for social integration and the enhancement of social capital" (Green & Haddon, 2011, p. 92). The effect of migrants on modern society continues to spread; Castells (1996) places the migrant worker as central to the development of the new networked society and, as explored in what follows, it is a society in which mobile phones and the Internet particularly play key enabling roles. Transnational societies with networks of multiple media are the basis of a new theory of "polymedia" developed by Madianou and Miller (2012). They posit that multiple media, including television, mobile and fixed telecommunications, the Internet, print, and broadcast news media, are central to the establishment of migrant communities and to the identity of migrants in contemporary society. "Ordinary people around the world, living not just in cities but in villages and small towns too, find their relationship with the media is entirely transformed once they have the money for computer access and phone services" (Miller, 2012, p. xiv). Migrants can now have an identity they can create and manage themselves via these media rather than being reported about and categorized in ways that are not always representative of their lives.

DEPENDEXY ON MOBILE COMMUNICATIONS

While satellite television and access to online news media in their native language is vital for keeping in touch with their culture and their home
community, immigrants have also come to rely heavily on other modes of communication technologies. Mobile communications in the form of mobile phone use and the Internet, accessed on a computer in a café or on their smartphone via free Wi-Fi outlets, are central to the mobile transnational ecosystem that migrants inhabit. During the course of my sociological research on mobile phone use, it became evident that mobile phones have a special and personal meaning for their users—a meaning that differs from the fixed telephone or any other type of digital communications device (Vincent, 2003). What appears to be so special about the mobile phone is that it has become a personal compendium for its user and an emotional and social support for the highs and lows of everyday life (Vincent, 2010). Most often owned and used by one person for whom the telephone number is unique, the device is personalized with many facets of its owner’s life: contacts, pictures, texts, voicemails, apps, ring tones, and more. Furthermore, the mobile phone number is usually only made known to others by the owner of the phone, and thus most people who have this number have had some personal contact with the owner. The development of smartphones allowing Internet access, the use of apps, and many other features beyond the plain old text and voice have augmented this personalization to include personal email address(es) and social networking sites. Furthermore, technology developments for tablets, pads, and handheld computers means that there are now several forms of device that perform similar functions to the mobile phone without being a conventional mobile telephone.

People say they cannot live without their mobile, and this is especially pertinent for recently arrived migrants as they settle into their new lives. Evers and Goggin (2012) note in their study of young male refugees from Africa who settle in Australia that the mobile phone becomes a means for “negotiating new ways of interacting and communicating and coordinating people, meeting, accessing resources and events” (p. 87). However, they also highlight the emotional consequences of phone calls home, as they take time to recover: from the sense of loss and separation the migrants are forced to endure. Emotions conveyed on ICT, and via mobile phones in particular, appear to be particularly intimate, with the added nuance of being conveyed via a device that is personal to the recipient alone; it is not implicitly shared with others as it is with fixed phones or PCs. Vincent and Fortunan’s (2009) concept of “electronic emotions”—emotions that are created, lived, and relived via machines—argues that there is a special awareness of these emotions when they are felt via mobile phones, laptops, and tablets and that there is an extraordinary relationship between the user and her or his mobile device (Vincent, 2013). The use of the mobile phone to maintain contact with families is an exemplar of the link between emotions conveyed and engendered by the device and the dependency people have on the mobile. Dhæst and colleagues (2013) assert that “within the European context migrants generally, but not always, travel from more traditional societies with strong
family values into more individualistic societies” (pp. 18–19). This move away from one’s home family environment puts more pressure on the individual to keep in contact with their home, something for which the mobile phone is an invaluable tool.

This affection for the mobile phone and the growing emotional dependency on it, which I revealed in my UK–based research, is not peculiar to the UK or to any particular group of users. Indeed, it would appear that people across the globe are finding similar attachments to this device, particularly as it becomes increasingly diverse in its capabilities such as in enabling wireless Internet connectivity. Dependency on mobile phones and the Internet is not simply because of the emotional familial connectivity it enables but also because of the commercial opportunities it affords.

There are now in excess of 3.2 billion mobile phone users worldwide, and mobile phone coverage is available in some of the most remote locations in the world (AT Kearney, 2013). Along with the growth of mobile phone penetration has been the development of the availability of the Internet, now accessible to many more people via Internet cafes and free Wi-Fi hubs, and soon to be more widely available on smartphones that combine many of the mobile facets of the Internet with the traditional voice and text capabilities of the mobile phone.

CULTURAL INFLUENCES

The complexities of combining mobility, multimodal communications, and migration are made even more complex by the different cultural influences that can affect the adoption of the Internet and mobile phones. Thomas and Haddon (2011, p. 5) examined the cultural factors that shape the take-up of ICTs, highlighting a host of issues that can lead to differences in the assimilation and distribution of ICTs across the globe. These include differences in lifestyle, spatial design of housing, fashion, approaches to work/life balance, digital divide, different histories of implementing new technologies, social and political control of communications, and religion.

Referring to the research of Hoffman and Novak (1998) on the diffusion of the Internet within the US, Thomas and Haddon also show how these are not just differences between nations but that ethnic background also plays a role, with Hispanics and Afro-Americans, for example, consistently lagging behind Whites and Asians on the take-up of the Internet in the US.

The ability to seamlessly move individual communications practices from one place to another does, however, mean that the social practices migrants bring with them to their new place of abode can be continued. This is not always beneficial to their integration into new societies, as demonstrated by the work of Bailén and Suárez (2013). They studied Mahgrebi women who have migrated to Spain, where there is plenty of opportunity to access
and use all kinds of media. The focus of these women’s lifestyle is dominated, however, by their traditions and Arabic language and, as a result, they find consuming products that do not correspond to their culture very difficult. Furthermore, Bailén and Suárez report that the media their respondents (and their children) consume is determined by the men in their family and, accordingly, their day-to-day lives remain separated from the Spanish culture they now inhabit (2013, p. 121). A further example of the separation of cultures within the communications media used by immigrants can be found among the teenage users of social network sites (SNS) researched by Vittadini and colleagues (2013). The older teenagers they interviewed (in Italy) have groups of friends from different cultural backgrounds who do not use the same SNS, and so these respondents have more than one site open at a time.

“On Facebook there are school friends or, in particular, my classmates (girls) . . . Italians . . . whereas in H15 there are my South American friends.” (Ecuador, F18)

“I open two windows at the same time . . . one on H15 for my [Peruvian] friends and one on Facebook, for my classmates and school-friends!” (Peru, F19). (Vittadini et al., 2013, p. 74)

It is interesting to note that cultural differences in the adoption and use of the Internet and other ICTs prevail. As Thomas (2007) reports in his analysis of the findings of the European SOCQUIT study, “In the more family oriented Latin social countries the regular use of the Internet only helps to maintain the weak contacts” (p. 790). This is because, in order to stay in touch, close family members are more likely to use the telephone than email to talk to each other.

The use of SNS can, however, be a very powerful tool for linking members of a global diaspora who are unknown to each other, as Greschke (2012) has identified in her research of Paraguayan migrants. They use an online discussion forum and instant messaging to connect with each other; “. . . even those entirely unknown to each other and distant in geographical space are enabled by the Internet to be close in virtual space where they can learn to create the experience of living together” (p. 137). This approach of a self-organizing diaspora is in contrast to the national approach adopted by the Bulgarian government. It has created an international online Bulgarian language media network with the specific objective of keeping in contact with the global Bulgarian diaspora, which comprises nearly one third of their population (Stoyanova & Raycheva, 2012). This network aims to raise the profile of Bulgarians abroad in order to leverage them as ambassadors of their home country and to encourage them to continue to work on behalf of Bulgarians. One such migrant to Ireland told of how he set up an Interact site for his Bulgarian community after finding on his arrival that there was no communication between Bulgarians living in his adopted country.
MANAGING EMOTION

It is would seem clear from the discussion thus far that within these migrant communities, emotions associated with distant relationships with loved ones are strongly felt and have to be managed. Migration and diaspora are not new phenomena, but, since the late 20th century, there has been an emergence and strengthening of transnational families and diaspora that are supported and sustained by new information communications technologies. Always-on communications in every corner of the globe have transformed the connectivity of people. Any journey, for any period of time, or for any distance is no longer constrained by the inability to maintain contact. Communications can now be in real time rather than taking days, weeks, or months to arrive. Migration need no longer be a static separation of a stopping of one’s life and beginning a new one but is instead manifested as a dynamic mobility enabled by telecommunications and transport that allow life to seamlessly flow from home to elsewhere (Fortunati et al., 2012b). Separation is by location and physical presence, but social, familial, and commercial relations can be maintained through multiple media. Successful continued contact is dependent to a great extent on the ability to access multiple media, although the mobile phone and the Internet café are probably the focal points for this contact.

While this new global mobility is well supported by ICT, the electronic emotions engendered by the increased use of mobile communications must somehow be managed by the individual migrants and those they have left behind. There are some aspects of these relationships, however, especially the emotions felt with regard to the intimacy of personal relationships, that cannot be replicated by social media and for which the presence of mobile phones and the Internet is no substitute. Two powerful examples are the sending of handwritten letters rather than digital communications and the intimacy of silence between copresent people. Receiving news in the author’s own writing conveys an extra layer of closeness and personal contact, as exemplified by this Italian student who was asked to discuss the differences between writing on paper and writing on screen:

Writing by hand says much more than what is written: from the pen stroke in fact can be understood the emotion of those who write: safety and strength of a strong character trait contrast[s] with the weak and trembling strokes of those who are begging or are showing themselves to be extremely fragile. (Fortunati & Vincent, 2014, p. 50)

The nuances and shades of emotion that can be read into handwritten letters are more acute than if the same words are typed into an email. Law reported in his study of migrant Chinese workers that when it was commonplace to write letters home at least weekly, “Recipients [of a letter] felt close to family members by just looking at the handwriting” (2012, p. 211).
Law had identified a decline in familial relationships between his respondents, who had migrated to the factories in Guangdong, China, and their left-behind families. Whereas, in the past, their families might receive an occasional fixed-line phone call as well as letters, they were now reliant on receiving news via a mobile phone call or email. It appeared, however, that the migrants made little contact with their families, perhaps because they knew they could do so at any time. Furthermore, their time in Internet cafes was spent interacting on social media and computer games with newfound Internet friends and not sending emails home (Law, 2012, pp. 210–211). Cheng researched migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta, finding them to be increasingly detached from their families as they floated from job to job. Avid users of the SNS QQ, they would turn to technology “to escape the boredom and sadness of a dull and aimless working life” (Cheng, 2012, p. 228). There is poignancy in the lives of these Chinese migrant workers for whom digital communication with home is always and easily available. Having supplanted the use of paper and pen, it has resulted in less contact. A letter can convey more than what is written in the words, but perhaps—as with the example of the calls home of the Australian (Evers & Goggin, 2012, p. 87)—a telephone call is even more emotionally painful, as there is nowhere to hide one’s feelings when an audible link is made.

Ironically, it was the loss of audible contact that proved most painful for one respondent in Madianou and Miller’s (2012) study of Filipino workers. In this instance, it was the comfort of the silence that exists between couples living together that was lost when the wife moved to live and work abroad. The left-behind husband became severely depressed when he lost the silent company of his wife of 27 years: “In a situation where communication had become effectively the silent medium of co-presence, not even polymedia could compensate for this absence of emotional bonding” (p. 135). Thus, it is clear that using a mobile phone and the Internet is not necessarily a substitute for lost communications when that communication is so dependent on copresence and silence. Nevertheless, when possible, some users are overcoming even this problem with the technology of Skype or other video and audio connections over the Internet; a child can be watched over or playtime shared by having a real-time Internet video link running while getting on with another task. Gordano (2013) provides examples of this in her study of migrants from Morocco and Ecuador now living in Catalonia. Although her access to the Internet is frequently restricted, one respondent talks about how being able to see her sick father on a video link is much better than a phone call; “to see each other through the webcam, you know? You can see, for instance, if there is an image of anguish or of calm” (p. 141).

It would appear from these experiences of some immigrants that the use of mobile communications presents a paradox; on the one hand, they are essential items for establishing a new life and keeping in touch, especially with newfound friends, but, on the other, they are no substitute for those moments of unspoken intimacy between people whose emotional
CONCLUSION

Over the centuries, people’s desire to communicate with others located in different places has steadily grown. In times past, when travelers first ventured to explore the world, messages might be delivered by others they met en route, but often it would only be on their return that there was any certainty that their loved ones were still alive. From the early days of the telegraph service to the present-day multimodally connected populations, keeping in touch has been a mainstay of society, and with the availability of ICTs, migrants can leverage this to extend their reach and bridge the void of distance and separation.

It is clear from the research discussed in this chapter that there is much use of mobile communications among migrant communities globally. Furthermore, the last decade has seen the burgeoning of mobile phone and Internet usage, particularly now that they can be accessed easily and at a very low cost. While usage might, to some extent, be determined by the digital literacy of the participants, there are other aspects of lifestyle and in particular cultural conditions that determine the take-up and usage of ICTs generally. It is not always possible for immigrants to access ICTs, perhaps because of traditional gender roles that preclude owning a mobile phone or accessing the Internet, or, quite simply, the cost of a mobile phone or a visit to an Internet café is more than can be afforded. Nevertheless, migrants can now continue to manage their everyday life via their mobile phone much as they may have done before in their home country. The ability to continue familiar social practices, such as speaking or texting with family and friends, is particularly important for new immigrants for whom the challenges of settling into a new country may at times be overwhelming. Indeed, the mobile phone takes on an even stronger emotional property, as it is held and kept with them at all times to ensure they can contact new friends and be contactable by those left behind. The mobile phone becomes a lifeline for resolving problems as well as being the point of contact in emergency now that families’ and friends’ household phones and familiar neighborhoods are no longer accessible.

The growth of the transnational families as well as transnational diaspora of connected individuals explored in the recent research on migration and ICTs discussed in this chapter, highlights the emotional paradox for those making a new life elsewhere. Households split by the migration of family members are extended globally, and while, for some, the use of mobile phones and the Internet may increase and intensify connectivity, for others the spatial extension of the household cannot be sustained in this way and relationships falter. Nevertheless, the always-on connectivity afforded by mobile phones and the Internet has transformed and changed the lives of migrants, often in
very positive ways. At the same time, however, it has heightened the emotional paradox that has emerged from being required to manage the electronic emotions stirred by unlimited opportunities to stay in touch with those left behind.

NOTES

1. COST is the acronym for European Cooperation in Science and Technology—the oldest and widest European intergovernmental network for cooperation in research (www.cost.eu).
2. SOCUIT, Social Capital, Quality of Life and Information Society Technologies, study conducted by Partners: TNO, Netherlands; Telenor, Norway; University of Essex, UK; Eurescom, Germany; FRT France between December 2003 and November 2005.
3. Vittadini and colleagues (2013, p. 80) also report finding similar difficulties in maintaining filial and sibling relationships among their respondents after migrating.

REFERENCES


