

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjms20>

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Version of record first published: 02 Jul 2012.

To cite this article: Pedro J. Oiarzabal & Ulf-Dietrich Reips (2012): Migration and Diaspora in the Age of Information and Communication Technologies, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 38:9, 1333-1338

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2012.698202>

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Migration and Diaspora in the Age of Information and Communication Technologies

Pedro J. Oiarzabal and Ulf-Dietrich Reips

'Migration and the Internet: Social Networking and Diasporas' is an interdisciplinary collection that explores new emerging media and technological networks—developed by individual and family migrants—which help to construct transnational and diasporic communities. Despite the fact that there is an increasing interest in 'migration' and in 'information and communication technology' studies, this Special Issue of JEMS goes beyond mere description of the use and impact of the technology on human mobility. It provides an in-depth analysis of a wide range of dispersed populations—including Albanians, Arabs, Basques, Croatians, Han, Hindus, Kurds, Romanians, Turks, Salvadorans, Serbians and Sikhs—and their interactions with globe-spanning instruments of information and communication. The issue brings together some of the leading specialists at the crossroads of migration and emerging technologies. The collection presents empirical and theoretical essays from the social, political and behavioural sciences, while discussing the latest Internet-based research methodologies applied to migration studies.

Keywords: Migration; Diaspora; Transnationalism; Social Networks; Internet; Internet Research Methodology

Much that is personal, where biographical and autobiographical narratives criss-cross the grander demographic histories and in doing so provide the light and shade of the diasporas, illuminating the processes of individual loss, redemption and identification . . . [has] . . . to do with communication, and the capacity of the displaced to construct communities, to create traditions and to sustain the links that make life meaningful both in relation to the local, the daily pattern of living in

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a new and distant world; and in relation to the global, the ties to be constructed with the home left behind or the one that is still longed for (Silverstone 2001: 19).

The extensive use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) constitutes a fairly new dimension in the study of migration and diasporic communities that has recently begun attracting the attention of scholars from a variety of disciplines and methodologies. This is still very much an under-researched area, particularly regarding the study of the use of ICTs by migrants within Europe. Consequently, Borkert *et al.*'s paper on the state of research in the European Union regarding the use of new technologies by immigrants and ethnic minorities concluded by proposing the 'establishment of a European Research Area on ICT and migrations' (2009: 25).

As in its influence on general political and societal developments like the Arab revolution (Alqudsi-ghabra *et al.* 2011), the impact of technology on migration is undeniable. It facilitates the flow of people across the planet and the formation, growth and maintenance of diaspora communities and family ties. In particular, the personal computer, the cell phone and access to the Internet have become quotidian resources among migrants who use them to develop, maintain and recreate informal and formal transnational networks in both the physical and the digital worlds, while reinforcing and shaping their sense of individual and collective identity (Boyd 1989; Glick Schiller *et al.* 1992; Haythornthwaite 2007; Horst and Miller 2006; Vertovec and Cohen 1999). Arguably, there have been major differences in the experience of migration before and since the creation of the Internet and digital communication media (Alonso and Oiarzabal 2010), as well as in processes of social inclusion, participation and visibility (Silverstone 2005).

Information and communication technologies have also much changed *how* we do research in the social and behavioural sciences, and much has affected science in general (Reips 2008). Via the Internet it has become much easier to quickly and efficiently access research participants from specific groups (such as migrants or groups who oppose migration). The anonymity that can be reached in Internet-based communication is particularly helpful in research with migrants who have a semi-legal or even illegal status or who may otherwise fear a face-to-face situation (Reips 2002).

The social and psychological aspects of the Internet have become an important research topic (e.g. Joinson *et al.* 2007). An increasing share of academic work has addressed the use and consumption of media—including radio, film, video, television and the Internet—by diaspora populations (e.g. Aksoy and Robins 2000; Allievi and Nielsen 2003; Karim 2003; Mattelart 2007). For example, *JEMS* has published special issues entitled 'Media and Minorities in Multicultural Europe', by guest editors Roger Silverstone and Myria Georgiou (2005), and 'After September 11 2001: TV News and Transnational Audiences', guest-edited by Marie Gillespie (2006). In addition, the study of how migrants utilise computer-based and mobile technologies to communicate, interact, exchange information, promote cultural and religious practices, and enhance political mobilisation across borders is becoming a substantial body of theoretical consideration and empirical research (e.g. Adams and Ghose 2003;

Anderson 1997; Dentice-Clark 2000; Diminescu 2002; Diminescu and Pasquier 2010; Georgiou 2005; Hiller and Franz 2004; Horst 2006; Lal 1999; Mattelart 2009; Mills 2002; Parham 2004; Stubbs 1999; Wong 2003).

Despite the increasing academic interest in the digital diaspora phenomenon, rapid technological changes such as the introduction of social media and mobile Internet require continuous revision. In this sense, 'Migration and the Internet: Social Networking and Diasporas' reflects upon these changes by presenting theoretical and empirical studies, with many examples, from an interdisciplinary perspective.

The Special Issue presented here is a collection of eight original articles on the instrumentalisation of information and communication technologies such as Facebook and mobile phones, among other media devices, by migrants and diasporas. International leading experts across diverse disciplines—Ethnic Studies, Internet Science, Mass Media Studies, Political Science, Social Psychology and Sociology—provide fresh insights into a wide range of dispersed populations (e.g. Albanian, Arab, Basque, Croatian, Han, Hindu, Kurdish, Romanian, Turkish, Salvadoran, Serbian and Sikh) and their interactions with globe-spanning instruments of information and communication. This Special Issue combines American and European research as a way to offer new methodologies for and different perspectives on the complex reality of international migration. Furthermore, it offers the latest in-depth methodological discussion on how scholars can use ICTs in their own research, again with particular emphasis on migration. The articles explore current themes (e.g. diaspora, globalisation, transnationalism and cosmopolitanism) and issues (identity, ethnic conflict, nationalism, religion, culture, family, community and territory, among others) that emerge from the intersection of ICTs and migration, while assessing their impact on and implications for migrants' lives, on- and offline.

The articles complement each other, and sometimes their scholarly findings explicitly differ, enriching the Special Issue as a whole. For example, **Mihaela Nedelcu** argues that culture is being created in new and important ways through online interaction between family members, while **Daniele Conversi** posits that computer-mediated communication is not capable of producing culture at all.

Nedelcu explores the emergence of new transnational social structures and transnational habitus facilitated by the digital revolution embedded in globalisation processes where the migrant becomes a main social actor. Her study of Romanian migrants' usage of ICTs reveals how migrants capture cosmopolitan values while defending particularistic values within the context of being from both 'here and there'.

Both Conversi and **Katrin Kissau** address the political dimension of the Internet and the cyber-activism displayed by migrants and ethnic minorities. Conversi focuses on the digitalisation of long-distance nationalism and the spread of minority groups' radical discourses throughout cyberspace, including the Han, Hindutva and Salafist movements, as sources of potential inter-ethnic conflict. Kissau reports an empirical study and analyses comparatively the diverse ways in which the Internet is used for political purposes—in terms of national, transnational and diasporic construction—

by Post-Soviet Turkish and Kurdish migrants in Austria, Germany and Switzerland. Her results show that migrants' degree of political participation online is best predicted from the existence of social networks online as well as political communication and participation offline.

Ulf-Dietrich Reips and **Laura Buffardi**'s article describes how the Internet can be used for behavioural and social science research with migrants and on people's attitudes towards migrants and migration. The authors discuss their findings on methods, techniques and tools in Internet-based research, with particular emphasis on social network sites and social media pertaining to the study of migration.

Gonzalo Bacigalupe and **María Cámara** explore the potential impact of ICTs on the lives of immigrant families and their transnational networks; how these families utilise social technologies and media; and their potential use in therapy with families. Similarly, **José Luis Benítez**'s article analyses the subject of transnational families by focusing on the Salvadoran case and its interrelation with information and communication technologies and new media. Benítez explores how Salvadoran families who have relatives abroad experience new transformations in the digital relationship with their relatives through the use and communicative competencies allowed by ICTs.

Khalil Rinnawi looks at the transnational media consumption modes among the members of Muslim communities in Germany. The author explores the ways in which the access to Arab satellite channels, and particularly to the so-called Islamist channels, influences the integration opportunities within the host society for the different generations of the Muslim community.

Finally, **Pedro J. Oiarzabal** presents the results of research on Basque migrants and their descendants as users of Basque diaspora-association groups on Facebook, the largest social network site on the Internet. The goals of the research were to study the reasons for using social network sites and for joining those groups, as well as to find out the potential effect on their 'offline' lives in terms of identity maintenance, community formation, migrant associationism, communication exchange and knowledge transfer.

'Migration and the Internet: Social Networking and Diasporas' is an academic inquiry into the political, social and cultural implications of new technologies regarding international migration. It draws from New Media, Internet and Web Research, and from Ethnic, Migration and Diaspora Studies. Thus, the collection could potentially have an impact in several fields, and our hope is that some of the early investigations collected here may become classics in the years to come, when the use of ICTs in migration research is likely to become standard procedure.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Basque Foundation for Science for funding Professor Reips' Ikerbasque Research Chair at the University of Deusto, and the European

Science Foundation COST Action IS1004 'WEBDATANET' (<http://webdatanet.eu>) for funding part of this research project.

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