

Reconfiguration of Migrants' Social Networks through Ethnic Websites

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ABSTRACT

As Mexicans from small and medium-sized localities migrate, they often face a shift in the way social interactions take place in the USA. This relocation usually has an impact on their social networks in terms of size and the strength of its connections. This paper presents the case of an ethnic website in Mexico used by migrants to reconfigure their social networks. First, migrants seek to create new connections by looking for similar others on the website. Also, migrants seem to be lurking on the website as a way to increase their awareness on others' lives. Finally, migrants also provide contact details and upload their photos so they can be somehow present in their homeland's daily life. This study can be used to better understand the current online practices of many Mexican immigrants in the USA.

Author Keywords

Diasporic communities, ethnic websites, social networks.

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI):
Miscellaneous.

General Terms

Human Factors.

INTRODUCTION

In the particular case of Mexico, territorial communities are often characterized by a complex set of social networks interwoven with community life and they generally maintain a strong sense of local identity [15]. That is, there is an offline community that sustains community life and online media might be used to reinforce this condition and this appears to be prevalent in small and medium-sized localities in Mexico. However, when people emigrate from these types of communities, they often face a change in the way social interaction takes place. They might suddenly shift from interacting in a bounded community to a more individualistic world such as the categories Groups and

Networked Individualism described in [19]. Many migrants observe changes in their social networks in terms of network size and the prevailing connections within, especially when travelling home is unfeasible. During our fieldwork, several migrants were longing for the "big house" as one of them referred to his hometown. In contrast, others commented on how they did not even know their neighbors in the USA, meaning that they were somehow longing for community life as experienced in their homeland. Despite the scattered nature of the population of many migrant communities in Mexico, many members of those communities still consider themselves as members of the same territorial community which has been referred to as transnational communities [9]. In these types of communities, migratory flows are significantly shaped by complex networks of kinship and friendship across the borders. In this way, several clusters of migrants from the same regions of origin are formed across the host land where migrants maintain much of their social conventions and might even form associations at the village level [11].

All this necessarily entails a period of adaptation and new strategies for maintaining connections to the homeland and for keeping in touch with close and intimate ties. Thus, many immigrants make use of the growing number of technologies for communication in the technoscape to maintain a sense of connection to the homeland not only because of nostalgia but also because of the possibility of an eventual return [14]. Influenced by their sense of local identity, the physical proximity with the homeland, or as a result of this clustering in the host land, many migrant communities have created online spaces where they can interact with others going through similar experiences. Many of those websites are related to geographically bounded localities i.e., villages or towns in Mexico. These online spaces (hereinafter referred to as Ethnic Websites) are generally maintained at the village level and seem to be instrumental in maintaining connections to the homeland.

The purpose of this paper is to provide some understanding on migrants' current practices for maintaining their social networks once they have relocated, particularly using ethnic websites. There is some evidence that suggests that not so many first-generation migrants have embraced the use of social networking sites (SNS) to maintain connections to the homeland but rather use ethnic websites to do so. Migrants seem to be using ethnic websites to reconfigure

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their social networks, to create new connections, and to maintain current ties to the homeland. Ethnic websites are websites created usually by expatriates with the aim of reconnecting to the homeland [1, 2]. Ethnic websites are often created from scratch and frequently they are run and maintained by them. Their content can considerably vary from one site to another but most of the times they feature local information (e.g., history, regional cuisine), photos, exchange of messages, and local news.

The work presented in this paper is part of a larger study which was carried out with the purpose of understanding how migrants were using ICTs to maintain connections to the homeland [1]. In particular, the work focused on understanding and characterizing the use of ethnic websites created with the sole aim of maintaining connections to the homeland. To understand migrants' online behavior, 46 interviews were conducted with users of the website of San Luis de la Paz living in Los Angeles area. The participants were all originally from San Luis de la Paz, a municipality in the central state of Guanajuato, Mexico with a reported population of 101, 370 inhabitants in 2005. The website of San Luis de la Paz provides a number of information and communication services including a general depiction of the municipality in terms of history, culture, local handicrafts, local legends, traditions, and regional dishes. It also features blog-like comments by the webmasters, videos uploaded by users, photo galleries maintained by users, advertisements of local businesses, a chat room, current weather conditions, and links to regional newspapers. Users do not have a personal profile but instead they upload content by providing their names and email addresses.

RECONFIGURING MIGRANTS' SOCIAL NETWORKS

One of the main uses of ethnic websites is reconfiguring migrants' social networks and maintaining current connections with members of their personal and extended social networks. These connections are maintained through various communication practices on and off the website. In the particular case of ethnic websites, migrants carry out several processes to reconfigure their social networks.

Creating Connections Based on Social Identity

Due to the local-ness of the large majority ethnic websites [4], migrants seem to look there for 'similar' people in terms of heritage, customs, dialect, and so forth [10]. Thus, the creation of new connections with people of shared ethnicity might be one of the reasons why people go onto these types of websites:

"I know that if I'm to find someone there, it's people from San Luis, or they have some connection with San Luis or they have something to do with it" (Rodrigo, 36)

In this sense, migrants know that if they go onto the website for a chat, there are good chances that they could have an in-group conversation with a complete stranger and yet they might feel socially identified with them because of their shared ethnicity [7, 16]. Even more, given the size of the

community, it is very likely that they have some friends in common:

"The chat [room] is mainly to find people... I've met some people there... during the conversation they asked where I used to live [in San Luis] and then they tell me 'ah, you are the daughter of so-and-so' and they identify me first... once we know who we are, we go to the msn, it's faster and more private" (Ramona, 55)

Even when previously unacquainted people come to the chat rooms, they might have some relationship with San Luis de la Paz which can make chatting more interesting to migrants. Making friends online seems to be commonplace in online environments [12] and thus ethnic websites can facilitate this since some form of affinity might already exist such as common friends, heritage, school, music, and the like. This process is partly facilitated by the local-ness of the website as it attracts generally people originally from San Luis de la Paz:

"Automatically you have a medium where you can get connected to the people of San Luis, you can send a comment and you know that many people will see it, above all, people of your community, you have a direct communication channel" (Rodrigo, 36)

In this sense, the website serves as a place where people from the same community of origin scattered across various locations can reunite again. To do so, our participants seem to be willing to nourish potentially enduring ties based on some form of affinity:

"Once, I left a message looking for old acquaintances and old friends, so I left my name and the name of the friends I had when I was in junior high, and that was how someone recognized me" (Luis, 53, living in the USA for 30 years)

The identification by 'old acquaintances and old friends' becomes then a central part of the process of reconstructing the structure of Luis's social network, formerly affected by relocation. This reconfiguration process involves former members whose connections were severed after relocation. Some others however seek the creation of new connections based on some form of affinity. In either case, the website is used to create and recreate connections, and nourish relationships that have the potential to be enduring and strong.

Maintaining Social Networks through Lurking

Often, the website is used as a medium to maintain connections with their social networks directly by engaging in message/photo exchanges. However, very often too this is accomplished through lurking:

"I love to see families, at times I recognize one and then I say 'This is this one and this is the other one' or 'I knew them when they were children and now they are all grown-ups' or 'I saw them about 4 or 5 years ago and look what they look like now!'" (Ramona, 55)

Through lurking, migrants can increase their awareness of members of their personal or extended social networks in the homeland. On the other side, the sender has no certainty about who is viewing the photo as it is uploaded to a public location where the audience is no one in particular and everyone at the same time. By publicly posting a photo or message, senders are aware that others might have a look at their photos so the nature of a photo/message has to be a trade-off between public and private nature. As commented by one of our participants, one of the upsides of the website over email, for instance, is that they can upload photos to a location where they can be seen from many places at the same time:

“When my mum goes to my uncles’ place... all my cousins have access [to the network]. It’s easier to see the photos when she goes to the house of my cousins... but my intention is that they can be viewed by other relatives in San Luis de la Paz or my cousins in Texas”
(Ana, 30)

As it can be seen, migrants and non-migrants engage in an exchange of photos and messages which helps them to maintain connections with members of their personal social networks. In addition, simultaneously, other users can have a passive participation in this process: lurkers, who may somehow maintain connections even when communication is not intended for them. In this way, the community maintains a flow of exchanges benefitting not only the appointed recipients but also some ‘bystanders’.

Maintaining Social Networks through Presence in Absence

It can be the case that migrants are physically absent from the homeland for many years, thus many aim to maintain some form of presence through a combination of communication exchanges, and those who can afford it by travelling [18]. While some make use of ‘mediated interactions’ through dialogical media such as the telephone, others use ‘mediated quasi-interactions’ to be *present* into their peers’ lives through intermittent communication expressions [17]. This is particularly true in some aspects of daily life communication. However, in many cases, our interviewees reported sharing photos with no one in particular:

“While being on this side, you have the desire of connecting... of being in touch with San Luis. Then, putting a photo [online]... it isn’t targeted to some person but it’s more like a way of being still in San Luis” (Juan, 36)

They post photos or messages into some sort of interactional vacuum in which there is no certainty of obtaining any response or reaction. This dissemination of simultaneous presences across time and space is possible due to the persistence of the information. That is, time and distance are subjugated to an embodied representation of the self which remain present on the website. This presence in absence is one of the ways that enable migrants to be in

touch with others within their social networks and the community. Therefore, the use of photos or messages on the website serves as a manifestation of presence pervading daily life in the community.

DISCUSSION AND CLOSING REMARKS

The understanding of this type of online behavior unravels important insights into the motivations of migrants for using ethnic websites as well as current practices. First, the creation, reconfiguration, and maintenance of connections within their personal social networks can be done through the website. Migrants use several strategies to create new connections with members of their extended social networks. It can be argued that this process is facilitated by the website as it congregates people with similar social identities [6, 16]. This might be one of the reasons why migrants might be willing to share photos and data with perfect strangers. There is some evidence that, as opposed to Facebook, migrants use the website for ‘social browsing’ (see [8]), meaning that they are willing to meet ‘strangers’ over the network. Moreover, due to the local-ness of the medium, the recreation of lost ties is also facilitated by the website [5]. Migrants seek to reconstruct their social networks which might have been altered after relocation, especially for those who migrated when communication services were scarce and expensive.

Second, through passively observing photos and messages others have shared, migrants can increase their awareness on the activities of others in their networks. Onlookers can observe family events, gossip, parties, and other occurrences usually of private nature by browsing through the website’s user-generated content. In some sense, it is like all the members of the community are part of one social network with privacy settings open. On the other flip of the coin, however, some migrants post their photos on the website just to be there and be part of the community. These people want to be found by former friends and acquaintances thus they post their photos on the website accompanied generally by their contact details. Therefore, even if it is by seeking people, lurking on the website, or waiting to be found, people seem to be using ethnic websites to reconfigure their social networks as there have been reported multiple benefits of having strong, varied social networks [13, 20, 21]. Even when it is true that members of these networks can be scattered across the USA and the homeland, many can benefit from being part of a larger community. In addition, for those planning to return to the homeland, having a strong social network can facilitate much of this process.

Certainly, the type of behavior presented in this paper is not definitive as technology can have an influence in the way people communicate. Migrants are still using custom websites to maintain connections to the homeland, but this scenario might rapidly change with the increasing penetration of SNSs in people’s lives. For instance, according to InsideFacebook.com, Mexico is one of Facebook’s fastest-growing markets behind India and is the

company's strongest country in Latin America, followed by Colombia and Argentina [3]. Therefore, ethnic websites might have to evolve to engage young users who may be commencing to use SNS as well as to support maintaining these connections on the move (i.e., mobile phones). More often than not, we have seen that many of these online spaces are transient since their existence and maintenance is carried out by volunteers who might do this as a hobby and not as a proper business. Therefore, it is to be seen if these types of online spaces will be around in the next few years. We will report on this and other issues in future conferences.

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