

Virtual Transnationalism: Technologically Supported Social Network Phenomenon

Irina Shklovski
IT University of Copenhagen
irsh@itu.dk

INTRODUCTION

In a world of digital connections that seem to span the globe with ease, social network sites, similar to instant messaging and email before them, have radically reduced the costs of relational upkeep regardless of where in the developed world people may be. Social relationships rely on communication to survive and physical distance remained a difficult barrier to surmount prior to the broad adoption of the Internet [18]. Phone and physical mail required too much investment of time or resources to be of use with all but the most important of connections. With the burgeoning collection of communication possibilities via the Internet, however, scholars have celebrated people's ability to keep social connections alive through life's upheavals. Though distance still mattered where close coordination and collaboration were concerned [14], in the area of personal relationships, effects of distance were reduced, enabling people to maintain these relationships even across larger distances and national borders.

In this paper, I focus on social network sites, as the primary socio-technical supporting structures for relational maintenance across national borders. Social network sites (SNSs) offer elaborate systems for perpetuating relational continuity through explicit articulations of connections and through unobtrusive and asynchronous behaviors [20]. Though many personal relationships are multimodal, the range of modalities used to maintain any relationship is associated with the strength of that relationship and its perceived importance [7]. While many researchers argue that these sites do not substitute, but augment the array of modalities that people use for relational maintenance [5, 23], it is likely that weaker long-distance ties rely on social network sites as primary methods of upkeep.

Social ties are, arguably, the most valuable assets and investments people accrue in the course of a lifetime. We rely on our social ties for getting through the routines of daily life as well as for coping with stress and emergencies. It is no surprise then that given an easy way to re-energize and expand a social network; people are likely to invest time into using SNSs for re-connecting with ties previously lost to life changes or relocation. After all, a broader social network might mean greater access to a range of informational resources such weak ties can offer [6]. This is

especially important for relationships that had lapsed due to emigration or other forms of international relocation. Rejuvenating such transnational connections could potentially provide access not only to broader informational resources but also to radically differing points of view as well as functional support for travel and work arrangements.

While social relationships are important in any culture, in societies marked by economies of shortage and authoritarian political systems, such as the Former Soviet Union, people rely on their social relationships for coping with contingencies of daily life as well as for providing the basic social services where the government falls short [12, 17]. In these types of personal networks, informal interactions are governed by norms of high degree of reciprocity, providing everything from information to functional support. At the same time these relationships demand a great deal of emotional investment for the development of trust in a context of expected government surveillance

Although the countries of the Former Soviet Union have undergone substantial economic and political change since the break-up of the Soviet Union, the practical and symbolic meaning of personal networks has changed little [9, 13]. With the demise of the Soviet Union resurgent nationalisms and volatile economic conditions motivated large swaths of the population to relocate, taking advantage of greater mobility afforded by the post-soviet states. What used to be stable local personal networks, developed over the course of a lifetime, became unstable connections to mobile and often long distant contacts [17]. Erosion of personal networks can have a substantial negative effect on people's ability to deal with problems and crises, in some cases even leading to social exclusion and marginalization [12]. Although people attempted to maintain relationships despite distance, the high costs of long distance communication and a steady stream of out-migration rendered long-distance ties not viable.

Russian-language SNSs provide an opportunity for people in Russia to reconnect to a Russian diaspora, re-establishing connections lost due to out-migration. This is the most visible example of a growth of ties that cross national boundaries.. The question remains, however, as to what these transnational connections engender and whether they carry the kind of subversive significance oft theorized by

the scholars of the transnational [1]. I argue that connections across borders maintained via social network sites result in a form of virtual transnationalism – bringing with it a different set of expectations, losses and gains where social relating is concerned. Considering transnational ties and their maintenances allows us to investigate the implications for the design and development of communication technologies, addressing the interplay of local life as it is interwoven with concern for connections across the globe.

THEORIES OF THE TRANSNATIONAL

Randolph Bourne initially introduced the notion of transnationalism in popular discourse in the early 20th century as a way to contest the idea of immigrant integration that he described as “the immigrant refusing to be melted” in the melting pot of “American culture.”[2] As the idea moved toward the privileged ground that it holds in discourse in the late 20th century, it shifted to mean an increase in the ability for people of certain means and aspirations to communicate, interact and conduct business regardless of national boundaries whose significance was seen as receding due to the process of globalization [1].

Transnationalism as a notion received a similar treatment in academia as anthropologists such as Levitt [11] and Smith [21] and later post-modern media theorists such as Appadurai [1] and Ong [15] theorized the concept into a new existence. Levitt and colleagues saw the idea of transnationalism rooted in labor migrant practices of establishing and maintaining links between the countries of their origin and settlement, often relying on large amounts of energy, financial considerations, geographical mobility and emotional investments [10]. In this conceptualization, transnationalism was about local communities in distant spaces tied to each other by virtue of particular human links, technological means and ways of navigating geopolitical conditions [22]. Scholars saw these as spaces of resistance to state impositions, spaces of, often inadvertent, political oppositions to the established order, hierarchy and attempts at cultural homogeneity [19]. In this context the notion of transnationalism described the subaltern and the dispossessed creating their own worlds of survival that extended beyond national boundaries and encompassed distant places affecting each other and producing what could be thought of as hybrid cultural forms .

Appadurai, Ong and other theorists saw transnationalism also manifesting in that earlier privileged space beyond or even apart from national boundaries and the control of the state [1]. These were represented by globe trotting academics and cosmopolitan businessmen who exhibited an insistent refusal of settled belonging in favor of broadly defined, non-culturally specific world-identities, where past and culture and nation were occasional reminders of pre-existing conditions one could transcend, while fighting to realize a new kind of transnational identity [15]. In this context the notion of culture became a process not a thing, and earlier definitions of belonging, identity and self fell short. Transnationalism became synonymous with a kind of

cosmopolitan sentiment for places one traversed and connections to these places created through technologically supported flows of information and people.

Scholars of transnationalism have produced a range of definitions of what a transnational tie and a transnational process might mean [8]. In an overview, Kivisto identified six different though overlapping notions of transnationalism used in the literature. These are: “(1) as a social morphology focused on a new border spanning social formation; (2) as diasporic consciousness; (3) as a mode of cultural reproduction variously identified as syncretism, creolization, bricolage, cultural translation, and hybridity; (4) as an avenue of capital for transnational corporations, and in a smaller but significant way in the form of remittances sent by immigrants to family and friends in their homelands; (5) as a site of political engagement, both in terms of homeland politics and the politics of homeland governments vis-à-vis their émigré communities, and in terms of the expanded role of international non-governmental organizations; and (6) as a reconfiguration of the notion of place from an emphasis on the local to the translocal” [8].

In earlier studies, economic transactions were the most obvious way of conceptualizing transnational ties and their impacts [10]. These connections were commonly underscored by the investments of capital into communication and physical travel across borders and exchanges of material goods as well as local information required to maintain these loyalties. Although many authors privileged information exchange and maintenance of interest in the local goings-on of a distant homeland as manifestations of a particular transnational interest, it is entirely possible that informational exchanges were side-effects, as occasional emotional benefits of physical movement and capital investments.

As technologies of communication and transport developed, cheap and easy methods of connecting across borders facilitated frequent resurrections of lapsed relationships that were rarely if ever maintained earlier once someone had moved across those borders. These relations most often do not participate in the economic exchange engendered in remittance economies and kin support. These lapsed relationships were most commonly friends and acquaintances. It is important to note that there was a reason for these relationships to have lapsed in the past as their maintenance, pre-internet, required inordinate investments for the kinds of gains they could potentially provide. With the advent of SNSs, however, these ties were far more within reach at a low cost of simply time and they were re-enacted and remembered through the mediated space of SNSs almost exclusively. The question remained whether these ties could truly be construed as transnational despite the obvious concern of spanning national borders.

In the course of my research in the former Soviet Union, I observed a particular kind of use of SNSs that challenged the notion of transnationalism. In this case, the people

involved lived in conditions where international travel was rare and the purview of the privileged, where economic connections were profoundly local and removed from the relationships dubbed transnational, where the concept of emigration had at a point in time implied a permanent physical absence with little chance of future visits. Here SNSs suddenly offered a promise of reconnection that brought about deeply emotional experiences of nostalgic remembrance and intimate exchanges of current status, but current uses of transnationalism did not quite fit despite these ties spanning national boundaries. These ties also spanned temporal differences as people reconnected not only with each other, but also with a kind of past that was long gone.

THEORIES OF THE VIRTUAL

The concept of the virtual invokes several rich philosophical traditions, although in HCI literature it has commonly been reduced to a reference to technologically constructed places or as a self-evident explanation for something that exists in opposition to the real. Much of the HCI literature conceptualizes the virtual as beyond reality, based in part on cyberpunk imaginings of novels such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Neal Stephenson's *Snowcrash* or the movie *The Matrix*. As Rheingold proposed, virtual reality was another type of reality [16] that allowed people to meet in nonphysical, simulated spaces such as chatrooms or multi-user games. This "technological virtual" [3] was concerned with the idea "non-physical, simulated spaces constructed by the use of technology."

De Souza e Silva & Sutko [3] propose a different theoretical basis for the notion of "virtual" based in Deleuze [4]. The virtual, they argue, can be conceptualized as "potential to be actualized and differentiated into diverse realities." When considering the people one might locate and reconnect with on an SNS, these relationships are potential to be actualized at the moment of choosing for either party involved in the tie. Yet this potential is also contained and circumscribed within the SNS. Although we might attend to the messages we receive on the SNS or the photos and notes our contacts post, we attend to them at the pace and with the intensity of our choosing.

The rejuvenated connections to people who reside around the globe are enacted within the same mediated space of the SNS, where interaction is constrained by the availability of access to the Internet, time differences and offline life-events. Attention to these primarily SNS-based relationships can be construed as an escape into a different reality, a source of new possibilities that can at times be converted from potential to actionable resource.

VIRTUAL TRANSNATIONALISM

The connections that people who use SNSs in the countries of the Former Soviet Union generated on SNSs were something I eventually called *virtual transnationalism*. Virtual transnationalism is a nostalgic connection with ties that now reside throughout the world. These connections are

about the past and about the nostalgia for past relationships and yet the current physical locations of the people involved situate and contextualize both the reminiscences about the past and the discussions of where life is now. Conceptualizing these connections as simply nostalgic remembrance would diminish the complexity and significance of the practice. In many ways this is not so much nostalgia as a way to reconstruct one's past self – by reconnecting with social ties that were part of a past where all actors were still "potential not yet realized". These ties themselves, in their new existence within the SNSs become an interesting form of cross-border connectivity that has the potential to translate into something else though it rarely does. This is also a kind of cross-border nostalgia that can result in current connections to distant places through reconfiguring personal narratives in the course of "catching up". What might translate these connections from potential to real social resources, however, is unclear. The people involved seem to insist that these connections exist purely because of a voyeuristic curiosity for where people you knew long ago ended up in life.

These are connections that are necessarily technologically mediated - they have to be because they are not sustainable when the costs of communication are too high. Yet these are also connections whose attractive accessibility through technology motivates said technology use. These are lapsed ties - where reconnections are not about reviving relationships but about catching up, dusting off, exchanging current news, reminiscing about the past, exchanging a bit of gossip and then laying them back to rest, only slightly less inaccessible now. And yet, these connections are also a source of potential for reconnection and return to the sending country.

CONCLUSIONS

Reliance on social ties and the practice of reconnection is not exclusive to the countries of the Former Soviet Union. The transnational aspect here is in the need to use the SNS in order to reconnect with a substantial number of social ties that have lapsed due to the damage done by extreme distances and movement between countries. Yet these conditions do not have to be present for similar patterns of behavior and use to happen elsewhere in the world with similar systems.

The notion of *virtual transnationalism* and the role of technology in that process has to do with the increasing ease with which communication and information technologies and especially internet have changed the level of intentionality and the amount of effort necessary to conduct border traversals. The idealistic notions of transnational research sometimes consider that the easing of these kinds of border traversals might result in unimpeded processes of democratization, free information flows that would undermine the control of the state and unknown but largely positive gains in some form of capital by the people involved. However, my research shows that this kind of interaction in fact has more to do with re-activating and re-

living memories associated with particular social ties and only rarely results in imagined or envisioned gains to the people involved.

Writing to someone across borders, having personal connections across borders - these connections are strongest when they are realizing their potential. The resurgence of transnational connectivity with classmates in the Former Soviet Union begs this question - it is not as if these people could never actually afford phone calls and letters to each other, they just did not bother to do so previously. In many cases even stronger relationships faded into oblivion and became simply memories because the individual lives of the physically present took over and the meaning and purpose of a distant connection receded to nothing. The resurgence through SNSs is interesting because just like before, most of these people did not expect to ever meet in person and did not desire to do so. In fact, many of the reconnections happened with people with whom there had rarely if ever been an expectation of actual keeping in touch at the time of separation. The reconnection now satisfied certain kinds of remembrances and curiosity borne of simple human interest in seeing where someone else had ended up in life and perpetuated a form of social excitement from the sudden proliferation of resources for chatty gossip among old contacts. It did not, however, translate into deep and long lasting social ties. It was a kind of *virtual transnationalism*, with cross-border ties contained within a socio-technical system of SNSs, whose potential was rarely, if ever, realized.

REFERENCES

- Appadurai, A. (1996) *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, Minn.
- Bourne, R. (1916) Trans-National America. *Atlantic Monthly*, 118, 86-97.
- de Souza e Silva, A. & Sutko, D. M. (2011) Theorizing Locative Technologies Through Philosophies of the Virtual. *Communication Theory*, 21, 1, 23-42.
- Deleuze, G. (1994) *Difference and repetition*. Columbia University Press, New York.
- Ellison, N., Steinfield, C. & Lampe, C. (2007) The benefits of Facebook "friends": Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12, 4, 1143-1168.
- Granovetter, M. (1973) The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78primary, 1360-1380.
- Haythornthwaite, C. (2005) Social networks and Internet connectivity effects. *Information, Communication and Society*, 8, 2, 125-147.
- Kivisto, P. (2001) Theorizing transnational immigration: A critical review of current efforts. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 24, 4, 549-577.
- Ledeneva, A. (2008) Blat and Guanxi: Informal Practices in Russia and China. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 50, 1, 118-144.
- Levitt, P. (2001) *Transnational Villagers*. UC Press, Berkeley.
- Levitt, P. & Jaworsky, B. N. (2007) Transnational Migration Studies: Past Developments and Future Trends. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 33, 1, 129-156.
- Lokshin, M. M. & Yemtsov, R. *Household strategies for coping with poverty and social exclusion in post-crisis Russia*. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 2556, 2001.
- Lonkila, M. (1997) Informal exchange in post-Soviet Russia: A comparative perspective. *Sociological Research Online*, 2, 2.
- Olson, G. M. & Olson, J. S. (2000) Distance Matters. *Human-Computer Interaction*, 15, 2-3, 139-178.
- Ong, A. (1999) *Flexible citizenship: The cultural logics of transnationality*. Duke University Press, Durham.
- Rheingold, H. (2000) *The virtual community: Homesteading on the electronic frontier*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Rose, R. (2000) How much does social capital add to individual health?: A survey study of Russians. *Social Science & Medicine*, 51, 9, 1421-1435.
- Rose, S. (1984) How friendships end: Patterns among young adults. *Journal of Social & Personal Relationships*, 1, 3, 267-277.
- Rouse, R. (1991) Mexican migration and the social space of post-modernism. *Diaspora: a*.
- Sigman, S. J. (1991) Handling discontinuous aspects of continuing social relationships: Toward research on the persistence of social forms. *Communication Theory*, 1, 106-127.
- Smith, M. P. & Guarnizo, L. (1998) *Transnationalism from below*. Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, N.J.
- Smith, R. C. (1998) Transnational localities: Community, technology and the politics of membership within the context of Mexico and U.S. migration. In M. P. Smith and L. Guarnizo (Ed). *Transnationalism from below*. Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, N.J.
- Steinfeld, C., Ellison, N. B. & Lampe, C. (2008) Social capital, self-esteem, and use of online social network sites: A longitudinal analysis. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 29, 6, 434-445.