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Digital Ties, Disrupted Togetherness: Locating Uneven Communicative Mobilities in Transnational Family Life

Dr. Earvin Charles B. Cabalquinto

Abstract

Ubiquitous digital communication technologies play a crucial role in shaping the nature of family life at a distance. Paradoxically, mobile device use has not only brought dispersed family members together, it also sometimes stirs communicative tensions in transnational households. These tensions are often produced by uneven access to a wide range of resources in mediated communication. Employing the mobilities lens, this paper examines the role of smartphones and networked communications platforms in binding ties and relationships among twenty-one overseas Filipino workers in Melbourne, Australia, and their left-behind family members in the Philippines. Based on data drawn from in-depth interviews and photo elicitation, the research study uncovers the performance, embodiment, and negotiation of transnational relationships through mobile device use. Significantly, it also demonstrates the impact of structural and infrastructural forces in enabling differential mediated mobilities. In illuminating asymmetrical mobile communication, I propose six categories: access, socio-technical competency, quality of connectivity, rhythms, affective experience, and communicative space. Ultimately, this paper offers a critical lens on investigating mobile practices in the conduct of transnational family life.

Introduction

This paper examines the mobile practices of twenty-one overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) in Melbourne, Australia, and their left-behind family members in the Philippines in forging and sustaining long-distance relationships. It specifically deploys a mobilities lens (Urry 2007) to unravel the uneven impact of mobile device use in the conduct of transnational Filipino family life. Special attention is paid to uncovering the production and reinforcement of social inequalities through mobilities and immobile infrastructures (Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2007). Ultimately, the paper seeks to uncover inequalities in a networked society by mapping out the different factors that engender and undermine the mobile practices of the transnational Filipino family.

Keywords: transnational communication, co-presence, smartphone, messaging applications, Facebook, uneven communicative mobilities

In this study, I extend the theorisation of mediated mobilities (Keightley and Reading 2014) in a transnational context. Building on the mobilities frame, Keightley and Reading (2014) argue that social, economic, and political processes influence mobile device use. In this regard, following this proposition allows us to consider the many and intertwined forces that affect mobile communication. For instance, sociocultural and socio-technological forces work as either a catalyst or barrier for enabling a satisfying transnational relationship (Parreñas 2005b, 2014; Madianou and Miller 2012; Lim 2016). By examining data drawn from in-depth interviews (Lindlof and Taylor 2002) and photo elicitation (Emmison and Smith 2000), I propose six categories to illuminate uneven communicative mobilities: access, socio-technical competency, quality of connectivity, rhythms, affective experience, and communicative space. By presenting these classifications, I foreground critical conversations on the politics of mobilities (Cresswell 2010) in the realm of a digital household.

Familial Ties, Digital Devices, and Disruptions

The transnational Filipino family embodies the uneven impact of globalised economies. With limited access to social welfare benefits and work opportunities in the Philippines (Rodriguez 2010; Aguilar 2014), members of a Filipino household often have to move overseas to access employment and thereby provide a better future for their left-behind loved ones. Historically, the Philippines has had a long history of overseas migration (Rodriguez 2010). Migration has been linked to the rate of unemployment, underemployment, and poverty in the nation-state (De Guzman 2003). Additionally, the deployment of neoliberal policies such as the Washington consensus has paved the way for social stratification across national economies (Rodriguez 2010; Aguilar 2014). To address a growing socioeconomic crisis, former president Ferdinand Marcos promoted and institutionalised Philippine migration through the signing of the Labor Code in 1974 (Parreñas 2001b; San Juan 2009; Aguilar 2014). From being a temporary solution to address a ballooning economic instability, it then became permanent, with dollars sent by overseas workers being used to repay foreign debt to the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and private banks (Rodriguez 2010). Importantly, pervasive corruption in the country also contributed to an unstable economy (Aguilar 2014).

Outward migration of some family members from the household has been perceived as a viable means to fulfil one's dreams as well as to support one's loved ones (Asis 1994; Rodriguez 2010). An overseas family member can send money to send their child to school (Asis 1994; Parreñas 2005a, 2005b) as well as finance the construction of a house or a small business (McKay 2007). Such practices show how migration operates as a collective family strategy towards survival (Asis 1994; Huang, Yeoh, and Lam 2008) in a neoliberal state. Meanwhile, on a national level, the Philippine government has continued to benefit from such high levels of human labour export by manufacturing low-skilled, feminised, and cheap labour (Parreñas 2001b). To date, an estimated 2.3 million Filipinos work abroad (POEA 2015). Significantly, remittances from overseas workers have continuously kept the Philippine economy afloat. According to *Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas* (Philippine Central

Bank), the amount of cash sent home by Filipinos abroad was 2.47 billion dollars in May 2018 (Lopez 2018). In 2017, the full-year cash remittances of 28.1 billion dollars accounted for 10 percent of the Philippines' gross domestic product (GDP) (Cuaresma 2018). It is through this outcome that the Philippine government has turned overseas migration into an industry, wherein special training, certification, and exportation of human labour has been managed (Guevarra 2010; Rodriguez 2010).

The members of the transnational Filipino family exemplify a mobile life (Urry 2007). Their lives are performed, embodied, and experienced through diverse forms of interdependent mobilities—corporeal and noncorporeal (Urry 2007). Filipino migrants, as an example of mobile subjects in a global economy (Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2007; Adey et al. 2013), utilise communication technologies to manage relationships at a distance. For example, migrant mothers use text messaging and overseas calls to express care to their left-behind children (Paragas 2005; Uy-tioco 2007; Cabañes and Acedera 2012; Madianou 2012; Chib et al. 2014). Further, migrant fathers perform their authoritative role through transnational communication (Pingol 2001; Parreñas 2008). They can also reprimand their left-behind children via mobile devices (Parreñas 2008). Meanwhile, left-behind family members also utilise a wide range of digital communication technologies to keep in contact with their overseas loved ones (Madianou and Miller 2012; Francisco-Menchavez 2018). In a sense, mobile practices facilitate mediated co-presence (Madianou 2016).

The advent of smartphones and a wide range of broadband-based platforms, as a form of “global mobile media” (Goggin 2006, 2011), has revolutionised the ways in which a sense of togetherness can be enacted and experienced. With ubiquitous computing, or “ubicomputing” (Greenfield 2006), web-based platforms have moved into mobile devices (de Souza e Silva 2006), which has enabled individual users to use platforms while on the move. The use of platforms such as Facebook, messaging applications, Skype, and other software programs facilitate “ambient co-presence” (Madianou 2016). Indeed, mobile device use is deployed to forge and maintain ties (Horst and Miller 2005, 2006; Uy-tioco 2017) in a communicative environment of affordances (Madianou and Miller 2012).

The study employs a mobilities framework (Urry 2007) to investigate the mobile practices of the transnational Filipino family in Melbourne, Australia. According to the late British sociologist John Urry (2007), various forms of mobilities—corporeal and noncorporeal— affect the conduct of social life in contemporary times. For example, mobile device use facilitates “communicative mobilities,” allowing nonproximate individuals to be imaginatively transported elsewhere (Urry 2000). Further, Urry (2007) contended that uneven access to resources produces differential mobilities. For instance, age, gender, disability, and social class inform mobile communication (Elliott and Urry 2010).

In rethinking differential mobilities enabled by unequal access to communication technologies and networked infrastructures, I extend Keightley and Reading's (2014) theorisation on mediated mobilities in a transnational context. Building on the mobilities frame, Keightley and Reading (2014) argue that social, economic, and political forces shape technologically mediated mobilities or mobile device use. This proposition illuminates the ways in which digital communication technologies have been moulded by different

structural factors. For instance, gender norms (Parreñas 2001a, 2001b, 2005b; Uy-tioco 2007; Ling and Horst 2011, Cabañes and Acedera 2012; Madianou 2012; Madianou and Miller 2012; San Pascual 2014a, 2014b, 2016) and social class (Parreñas 2001b, 2014; Thomas and Lim 2011) mould mobile communication.

In theorising mediated mobilities in a transnational sphere, I specifically pay attention to the different social and infrastructural forces that influence transnational exchanges. My analysis builds on previous research that determined the barriers in transnational communication. The lack of internet access (Baldassar 2008; Madianou and Miller 2012), cost (Horst 2006; Wilding 2006; Madianou and Miller 2012), digital literacy (Wilding 2006; Baldassar 2008; Madianou 2016), personal capacities (Kaufmann, Bergman, and Joye 2004; Wilding 2006; Baldassar 2008), unavailability to communicate (Parreñas 2001a, 2014), and the disparity of the technological landscape between the host and home country (Parreñas 2005a; Baldassar 2008) are a few of the many factors that undermine communication at a distance. By critically reflecting on the effects of asymmetrical mobile communication in the conduct of family life at a distance, I contribute to locating the politics of mobilities (Cresswell 2010) in the axis of migration studies and digital media. For Cresswell (2010), the politics of mobilities articulates how mobility is enacted and negotiated by certain types of mobile subjects in navigating discursive relations, spaces, and sociality. It is through this point that I present six categories to unpack differential communicative mobilities: access, socio-technical competency, quality of connectivity, rhythms, affective experience, and communicative space. These categorisations aim to guide us in exposing the tensions and inequalities in digital cultures.

Research Methods

This research study sought to investigate the mobile practices of twenty-one OFWs in Melbourne, Australia, and their left-behind family members in the Philippines. It paid special attention to the case of a transnational nuclear Filipino family in Australia given its growing population within the multicultural state. According to the recent report released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2016, there were 232,284 Philippine-born in Australia: 155,680 had Australian citizenship and 73,364 did not (ABS, 2018). Notably, this study specifically involved informants in Melbourne who were holders of Subclass Visa 457 or temporary work (skilled) visas, and their left-behind loved ones. Subclass visa 457 holders, as well as their family members, are not entitled to social welfare benefits provided by the Australian state to permanent residents and citizens (Larsen 2013). It is through this condition that Subclass Visa 457 holders opted to leave their families behind. This arrangement therefore compelled them to become heavily dependent on mobile devices and networked platforms to sustain familial ties and relationships.

Snowball sampling was deployed to recruit informants. Filipino organizations and Filipino-run media outlets in Melbourne were also approached during the recruitment process. The study recruited informants coming from diverse backgrounds. The age ranged from 26 to 74 years old. The levels of education included high school, technical/vocational, and

postgraduate qualifications. Only one respondent, who was based in the Philippines, was unemployed and the rest had skilled and professional jobs.

In-depth interviews (Lindlof and Taylor 2002, Creswell 2013) and photo elicitation (Emmison and Smith 2000) were employed in this research study. Twelve OFWs were interviewed in Melbourne between December 2013 and April 2014. Nine left-behind family members were also interviewed in the Philippines in May and June 2014. Two Philippine-based participants and one Singapore-based participant opted to be interviewed via overseas call. The interviews mapped out the informants' mobile practices, motivations of use, and the communicative obstacles they dealt with. Photo elicitation was also deployed. It involved inserting a photograph produced and owned by an informant into a research interview (Emmison and Smith 2000, Harper 2002), which enabled the informants to reflect on their mobile device use. Each interview lasted from 45 minutes to over an hour. The responses, mostly in *Tagalog* and *Taglish* (Tagalog-English), were tape-recorded, transcribed, coded, and analysed. Pseudonyms were used and faces on photos were blurred to protect the privacy of the informants. Only quotations included for publication were translated into English.

Uneven Communicative Mobilities

Digital communication technologies and networked online platforms are constitutive of transnational familial ties (Horst 2006, Horst and Miller 2006). Smartphones, mobile social media, and a spectrum of mobile apps fuel continuities of linkages among family members fragmented by migration (Madianou and Miller 2012).

During my fieldwork, I discovered that most of the informants owned and used a smartphone. Informants in Melbourne were on mobile phone packages, which allowed them to utilise a mobile credit for text messaging and overseas calls within and outside Australia. In the Philippines, left-behind family members were paying monthly fees for a mobile credit. Notably, overseas family members covered some of the mobile credit expenses. Further, left-behind loved ones often received second-hand smartphones and other mobile devices from their overseas loved ones. The majority had a broadband connection in their house or rented apartment unit, except for two families who were based in provincial areas in the Philippines. Online platforms such as Skype, messaging applications, and Facebook were commonly used. Notably, only one informant did not have a Facebook profile. She confessed in the interview that she does not post anything on Facebook because she has nothing worth posting about. Ultimately, the informants forged and sustained ties across borders and distances through an array of communicative devices and platforms. However, I also noticed that mobile device use was highly differentiated. Here, structural and infrastructural forces typically shaped transnational communication. It is through this point that I propose the six categories to elucidate asymmetrical communication from a distance. Once again, these categories are access, socio-technical competency, quality of connectivity, rhythms, affective experience, and communicative space. I discuss each of these below.

Access

To be able to participate in a networked environment requires access to communicative devices and online platforms (Madianou and Miller 2012). However, I noticed during my fieldwork that possession of broadband-based mobile devices and platforms did not automatically guarantee access to a multimedia-based and networked connectivity. A hierarchy of connection emerged where some research informants lacked access to broadband connectivity due to socioeconomic reasons. With that absence of internet connectivity as a technological infrastructure (Horst 2013, Farman 2015), mobile device use becomes limited. A case in point is the differential mobile experiences of Rachelle, a 28-year-old sales manager, and Marie, a 59-year-old cleaner in a university.

Rachelle owned a number of mobile devices. She had two smartphones (a Samsung device and an Apple iPhone), an iPad mini, and a laptop. She had been using Viber, iMessage, Facetime, and Facebook on a daily basis. Importantly, she had access to mobile broadband and Wi-Fi connection. In the Philippines, her family members had access to a gamut of mobile devices, platforms, and networked connectivity to sustain transnational ties. In fact, Rachelle admitted that she had bought her six siblings and her mother a smartphone to ensure constant communication among each and everyone. In contrast, despite having a smartphone, Marie had not had the chance to use broadband-based platforms to connect with her loved ones in the Philippines. In the interview, she revealed that she opted not to provide her left-behind loved ones a broadband connection because of the additional monthly broadband cost that she had to pay. As the provider for her left-behind loved ones in the Philippines, she thought that having a computer and an internet connection in their household back home was not practical. Further, she added that she just encourages her nephews and nieces to rent a computer in a nearby internet café should they need the internet to work on an assignment. With this arrangement, Marie had relied on overseas calls to connect with her loved ones.

Mobile device use enables migrants like Rachelle and Marie to perform and embody a sense of togetherness with their distant loved ones. However, the lack of access to broadband connectivity paves the way for uneven communicative mobilities. In a networked environment, some transnational families can afford a multimedia-rich, interactive, and networked experience. They can fully utilise the features of their devices and platforms by having access to broadband connectivity. Yet, others choose to use basic mobile communication for transnational connections. Often, socioeconomic reasons shape such mobility decisions.

Socio-Technical Competency

To fully utilise mobile devices in mediated communication normally requires a certain level of socio-technical skills and knowledge (Urry 2007, Madianou and Miller 2012). In my study, I uncovered how age influenced differential mobile device use. For example, younger informants were adept in using multimedia-based platforms. In contrast, informants who

were fifty years old and above typically faced difficulties in using mobile platforms. Two cases in point are Aimee, a 27-year-old education consultant in Melbourne and her brother Gerry, a 32-year-old customer service representative in Singapore, and Mary, a 56-year-old city social welfare officer in the Philippines.

On top of accessing social media and other online channels, the use of a group chat in messaging applications was common among younger informants. For example, Aimee and Gerry shared their experiences in using a group chat to sustain affective ties. Labelled “Santiago Babes,” the group chat in WhatsApp included Aimee, Gerry, and their sister in Dubai. For them, the online platform enabled the exchange of texts, videos, and multiple photos. In my interview with Gerry, we talked about a photo of a durian fruit (see Figure 1). Gerry admitted that he intentionally sent the photo via the group chat to stir conversation and laughter among his siblings. He was successful at this gesture as all of them exchanged messages pertaining to the odour of durian. In this case, random and playful images facilitated bonding between Gerry and his siblings.



Figure 1. A sample photo that was exchanged through a group chat.

Older informants utilised different platforms to connect to their loved ones. While they had access to multimedia platforms, they usually opted to use basic communication channels. For instance, Mary, who has a son working as a registered nurse in Melbourne, preferred a regular call to keep in contact. Mary said, “I prefer he calls [...] I prefer calls. It’s convenient.” Despite relying on phone calls, Mary also utilised Facebook to connect with her overseas son. However, unlike the younger informants who actively used the

many features of social media, Mary had not had any chance to send images or multimedia content to her son through an online platform. She admitted that her lack of knowledge of how to send, share, or upload photos constrains her. As a result, she had always opted to peruse her son’s online images and status updates to know and assess his whereabouts. Mary generated positive feelings through this online practice. She said, “I’m happy. I feel like he is around. I’m updated about what’s keeping him busy, or where is he.”

I argue that socio-technical competency stratifies mobile experiences. Younger users can maximise the multiple affordances of a platform to exchange mundane and creative contents. In contrast, some transnational family members can be constrained in using multimedia and online platforms. It is then through “lurking” or relying on overseas calls that transnational connection and affective ties are enacted and sustained.

Quality of Connectivity

A stable broadband connection plays a major role in the functionality of the majority of platforms and applications in mobile devices. Notably, the issue of accessing a steady broadband connectivity among the informants emerged from the interviews. While I only had one informant in Melbourne who complained about internet speed, several informants from the Philippines expressed their frustration about internet connectivity. An example is Cherry, a 45-year-old accountant in Cavite, who often had to make necessary adjustments during a Skype session with her husband due to a poor broadband connection. As she said, “If I couldn’t see him, I’d say, ‘Pa, your video is unclear.’ So, there were times we chose not to use the video because I couldn’t hear him clearly. The connection was not good.”

Significantly, the disparity between the mobile experiences of informants as shaped by the quality of broadband connectivity is not a surprise. In the first quarter of 2017, the average Philippine internet speed was 5.5 Mbps and speeds peaked at 45 Mbps (Akamai 2017). This figure is low compared to the average Australian internet speed of 11.1 Mbps and a peak Mbps of 55.7 (Akamai 2017). Elsewhere, I have noted that unstable connections are dealt with not only on a daily basis but also during big events, such as Christmas and New Year celebrations (Cabalquinto 2018b). Indeed, uneven technological infrastructures between the host and home countries undermine communication from a distance (Parreñas 2005b; Madianou and Miller 2012).

Rhythms

Transnational communication is operationalised through the constant synchronisation of everyday schedules (Green 2002). Previous studies have shown the importance of scheduling overseas calls through text messaging (Wilding 2006; Baldassar 2008). Texting before calling has also been considered a nonintrusive way to connect to distant loved ones (Ling 2004). Importantly, the proliferation of messaging applications and online platforms has allowed transnational families to “microcoordinate” (Ling and Yttri 2002) everyday rhythms. In cases where personal activities and commitments hinder synchronous communication with certain platforms, other platforms are used to activate asynchronous communication (Wilding 2006, Madianou and Miller 2012).

During my fieldwork, I observed that multiple devices and platforms had been used by my informants to coordinate and synchronise transnational exchanges. For instance, a Viber group chat was used by Rachele and her siblings to capture, curate, and share their everyday movements. The act of sharing allowed them to stay updated about each other’s lives even though they were not communicating in a synchronous modality. The persistent transmission of random content (Licoppe and Smoreda 2005) indicates *pagpaparamdam* (making one’s presence felt) (Pertierra 2011). Indeed, the flows of personal information that display each other’s daily mobilities enable ambient co-presence (Madianou 2016). In contrast, other transnational family members were left with a few choices for keeping in touch. For example, Dolor, a 51-year-old housewife in the Philippines, had to rely on

her overseas son's call. She also had to adjust to her son's irregular work schedule (due to his casual employment status) in a hospital in Melbourne. As she shared, "Before he leaves for work, he'll tell me his schedule. I don't call him because I don't want to disturb him. And he switches off his mobile phone anyways. I know my limitation. So, we need to understand each other." Despite this constraint, she always looked forward to having conversations with her son.

Daily spatial and temporal rhythms of transnational family members shape mobile device use. However, these rhythms are also shaped by a transnational family member's access and use of devices and platforms. Thriving in a polymedia environment tends to offer a conducive communicative environment for some. There is less pressure for synchronous communication when asynchronous exchanges work well. However, the lack of access to other platforms, along with other family members' busy work schedules, result in "pauses" and "waiting." Transnational communication can become unidirectional (Parreñas 2014) as a result of juggling differential rhythms and mobile engagements.

Affective Experience

Mobile communication often produces contradictory experiences among transnational families (Horst 2006; Madianou and Miller 2012). These tensions are often shaped by uneven sociocultural expectations (Madianou and Miller 2012; Lim 2016). During my fieldwork, I noticed that bittersweet feelings were experienced by the informants. On the one hand, constant communication has become a way to develop trust among transnational families (Madianou and Miller 2012). On the other hand, interrupted communication causes panic and anxiety. For example, Cherry shared her frustration when her husband missed a Skype session with her:

The problem is that I panic. I worry. So, the next day, I messaged him on Facebook. "Why you did not call me last night?" Then he told me that he fell asleep. He was very tired from work. Then he said, "Can you relax? It's as if something bad happened. Nothing happened. I fell asleep." But sometimes he acts a bit strange too. Whenever he calls me, he expects me to pick up his call straightaway. So in times that I wasn't able to pick his call immediately, he would say, "What is taking you too long to answer my call? Where did you go?"

Evidently, mobile device use can become a source of ambivalence (Madianou 2012). The affordance of and expectations created by perpetual connectivity through mobile device use (Katz and Aakhus 2002) can create extra burdens and demands. In some cases, individual users tend to overlook the possible factors that inform mobile communication.

Communicative Space

Pervasive mobile devices, networked connectivity, online platforms, mobile applications, and digital information have collapsed the distinction between digital and physical spaces (de Souza e Silva 2006). In a transnational context, dispersed family members have built and embodied a sense of home through a “transnational space” (Paragas 2005) or a “technoscape” (Appadurai 1996). Elsewhere, I presented the reterritorialisation of home through the consumption of networked devices and platforms while on the move (Cabalquinto 2018a). However, it must be noted that the conflation of offline and online spaces can be undermined based on diverse contexts and situations (Wilding 2006, Madianou and Miller 2012). I expand on this point by presenting the mobile experiences of Benjie, a 38-year-old church worker in Melbourne, as well as his wife and three children, in enacting and negotiating communicative spaces for homemaking.

Benjie recalled the day he felt frustrated upon seeing the living condition of his family members in the Philippines through a Skype session. He could not help but compare his spacious house in Melbourne to his family’s house in the Philippines. As he lamented, “Visually I saw their conditions, where they live, how the house looks like. I felt upset. The size of their place is so small. I can fit the space where they live into my place here in Melbourne.” To address his family’s situation, he sent some extra cash for them to rent a bigger space. However, his family members opted to stay in the current place. The house’s proximity to his wife’s workplace and the children’s school was pointed out as a practical reason to stay put. In this case, Benjie decided to respect his family’s decision and continue sending them financial support. Ultimately, Benjie’s experience indicates how differences in location and physical spaces undermine the embodiment of togetherness through transnational spaces. Asymmetrical conditions remind transnational family members of their separation (Madianou and Miller 2012).

Concluding Thoughts

In an era of transnational mobility, digital communication technologies and online platforms have facilitated communicative opportunities and challenges among the transnational Filipino family. This paper has demonstrated the ways in which OFWs in Melbourne, Australia, and their left-behind family members in the Philippines have enacted and experienced family life despite the distance. Significantly, the formation and sustenance of transnational ties and relations have also been wrapped with asymmetries and tensions. Some transnational family members tend to enjoy a multimedia-rich, networked, and mobile family life. Others grapple with a mediated environment shaped by structural and infrastructural forces.

I argue that we must not lose sight of the production and reinforcement of social inequalities. Certainly, the embeddedness of transnational family life in a polymedia environment has made family separation bearable. Yet, hiding behind the façade of constant, simultaneous, and multimedia-rich connectivity are the ruptures of communicative mobilities, including

uneven access to resources, painful affective experiences, and exclusionary spaces, interactions, and practices. I therefore recommend future studies to develop a critical lens in examining mediated communication in the context of transnational family life. By doing so, we can emphasise the need for an equitable, accessible, and emancipatory connectivity, especially among those who have been deeply impacted by a globalising economy.

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