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How social media transform migrant networks and facilitate migration

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- analyse migration as part of broader global change
- contribute to new theoretical approaches
- advance understanding of the multi-level forces driving migration

Abstract

We argue that social media are not only new communication channels in migration networks, but that they actively transform the nature of these networks and thereby facilitate migration. Despite some limitations stemming from the ‘digital divide’ and the reduced trustworthiness of virtual ties, qualitative data reveal four relevant functions of social media that facilitate international migration. First, social media enhance the possibilities of maintaining strong ties with family and friends. Second, they are used to address weak ties that are relevant to organizing the process of migration and integration. Third, social media establish a new infrastructure consisting of latent ties. Fourth, they offer a rich source of insider knowledge on migration that is discrete and unofficial. This makes potential migrants ‘streetwise’ with regard to the undertaking of migration. Based on these empirical findings we conclude that social media are transforming migration networks and thereby lowering the threshold for migration.

Non-technical summary

This paper argues that social media transform migrant networks and thereby facilitate migration. The data gathered during the research reveals four ways in which this happens: 1) using social media helps migrants to maintain strong ties with family and friends, lowering the threshold for migration; 2) social media can provide a means of communication with weak ties that are relevant when organising the process of migration and settlement; 3) using social media establishes a new infrastructure consisting of latent ties; 4) social media are a rich source of unofficial insider knowledge on migration. The paper concludes that social media are transforming migration networks and thereby lowering the threshold for migration.

Keywords: migration networks, migrant networks, social ties, social capital, the internet, social media

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1 Introduction

For many years, international migration meant a radical detachment from one's community of origin (Faist 2000). Migrants were characterized as 'uprooted' because their existing social ties had been cut. Means of long-distance communication have inherently changed this situation. Early migrants kept in touch with family and friends in their place of origin by sending letters and packages by mail (Thomas and Znaniecki 1918-20). Sometimes this would take months to arrive. More recently, scholars have described how the boom in cheap international telephone calls served as social glue connecting migrants and non-migrants all over the world (Vertovec 2004; Horst 2006).

In today's network society, the speed and intensity of information and communication flows have increased tremendously and are shaping our everyday lives to an ever-greater extent (Castells 1996; Wellman 2001). The internet is no longer merely a tool for scientists or the military – purposes for which it was developed only 20 years ago – nor is it the aggregate of top-down dotcom domains as it was in the late 1990s. The internet has rapidly developed into a social medium weaving together the contributions of millions of people, making them not mere consumers but also active producers of media content. This phenomenon has been dubbed 'Web 2.0' (O'Reilly 2005). Social media have evolved to become important information distribution channels, in addition to serving as personal communication tools. This revolution in information and communication technology (ICT) is of particular significance for migrants and non-migrants who live geographically dispersed but often remain connected through transnational networks (Mahler 2001). The 'death of distance' (Cairncross 1997) is lowering the costs and risks of migration.

In migration studies, literature is emerging that addresses possible consequences of internet use for migration processes (Hiller and Franz 2004; Adams Parham 2004; Van den Bos and Nell 2006; Diminescu 2008; Ros 2010; Komito 2011). Yet despite the widely acknowledged significance of ICT for international migration, there is no empirically founded and theoretically embedded understanding of this nexus of the 'age of migration' and the 'network society' (Ros et al. 2007: 11; Borkert et al. 2009). Most research so far has focused on the internet providing traditional one-to-one communication tools, used to maintain social ties. However, social media today have much more to offer. Not only has the medium changed, but also the network structure in which communication takes place, as well as the amount and type of information that is accessible. In this paper, we address the following research question: In what ways does the use of online social media by migrants and non-migrants facilitate international migration? A sub-question concerns how social media affect the functioning of migrant networks.

Qualitative data on social media use by migrants, and on how this affects their migration strategies, reveal four relevant functions of social media in migration networks. We also encountered some limitations to these functions, stemming from 'digital divides' and the reduced trustworthiness of virtual ties and information. All in all, we argue that social media are not only new communication channels in migration networks but that they actively transform the nature of these networks and thereby facilitate migration.

2 Migration networks, social ties and social media

Analysis of migration networks is key to understanding the dynamics of contemporary migration (Tilly 1990; Massey et al. 1998; Brettell and Hollifield 2008; Vertovec 2008). Tilly (1990: 84) states that ‘the effective units of migration were (and are) neither individuals nor households but sets of people linked by acquaintance, kinship, and work experience’. Sociological literature asserts that it is these globe-spanning networks that serve to stimulate and perpetuate migration (Massey et al. 1998; Samers 2010). Migrants are not mere objects of the macro-processes that steer migration, but rather subjects who selectively move between different countries (Brettell and Hollifield 2008).

Typically, linkages between sending and receiving contexts are established by pioneer migrants, driven by factors independent of networks. Once early connections have been established, other migrants will follow, travelling the beaten paths. This pattern has been referred to as ‘chain migration’ (MacDonald and MacDonald 1964). Social capital within migration networks helps lower the costs and risks that migration entails. Migrants therefore prefer to migrate to places where they already have contacts. Eventually, migration networks might become the sole reason why people continue to migrate even though other determinants have lost their significance. Migratory movements, once started, become self-sustaining. Massey et al. (1998) describe this tendency as ‘cumulative causation’, claiming that migration alters the social and economic context in which subsequent decisions to migrate are made.

A fundamental assumption of the migration network approach is that a multidirectional flow of information lies at the basis of every migratory process. This concerns for instance information on the destination context and on the organization of the journey. This information is obtained through the social capital provided by the networks. Social capital, according to Bourdieu’s definition, refers to ‘the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition’ (Bourdieu 1985: 248). In migration literature, these networks are mostly understood as consisting of a set of ‘strong ties’ (Granovetter 1973) based on kinship, friendship, or a shared origin community, connecting migrants and non-migrants (Massey et al. 1998). International migration literature shows that traditional networks are still important to understanding the nature and direction of specific migration flows (Faist 1997). However, today many people are no longer part of traditional, densely knit, tightly bounded communities, but rather of sparsely knit, loosely bounded, frequently changing networks (Wellman 1999: 96). Ties within such networks are generally weak.

According to Granovetter (1973: 1364), for the purpose of gathering new information and resources – an important task for potential migrants – weak ties are often more valuable than strong ties. ‘Weak ties’, or ‘bridges’, are links between social groups that harbour different pools of information. These ties are in many situations more valuable than strong ties because in the latter case, the two individual networks will largely overlap and contain no new information or resources. Granovetter’s hypothesis of ‘the strength of weak ties’ is adopted in the distinction between ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social capital (Putnam

2000). While bonding social capital refers to the value of networks for homogeneous groups, bridging social capital serves to increase the society-wide spread of information and innovative ideas.

Web 2.0 has created a deterritorialized social space that facilitates communication among geographically dispersed people in migration networks. Social media are internet applications whose contents are primarily generated by their users. The concept of social media hence refers not only to social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook, but also to forums, weblogs, YouTube, Twitter, etc. In fact, many online applications have become social media to a certain extent. Whereas social network sites are primarily organized around people, other social media applications are dedicated to 'communities of interest' (Boyd and Ellison 2008: 219).

Every medium comes with certain 'social affordances'. For many years, communication in migrant networks depended on mail. This communication was asynchronous as the message was sent days or even weeks before it was received. An affordance of letters is that they not only serve as communication bearers, but can be kept and cherished as symbols of long-distance solidarity (Thomas and Znaniecki 1918-20; Madianou and Miller 2012). Audio cassettes are taped over and thus used multiple times, offering greater affordances than letters for illiterate people. Also, this type of communication carries the emotional immediacy of the spoken voice (Madianou and Miller 2012). Communication via telephone is synchronous and offers interactivity and simultaneity. Texting is less direct and less elaborate than calling. The internet initially provided the possibilities of email, VoIP (voice over Internet Protocol) calls and instant messaging. These ways of communication digitalized earlier forms of communication, making it more synchronous, less expensive, more frequent and more media rich.

As the internet evolved as a social medium, one of the key affordances was that communication became more widespread and less one-to-one. Social media make it possible to access a wider range of individuals to whom we are weakly tied, if at all (Haythornthwaite 2002). Social network sites organized around individuals and social media organized around communities of interest converge and overlap. Therefore, in contrast to traditional mass media and communication media, social media can serve to bridge activities: 'the telephone might be a more intimate way of interacting with old friends but it is not nearly as effective in developing new relationships as the computer' (Hiller and Franz 2004: 743). Via social media, people can look up people with whom they have lost contact and reconnect with them (Hiller and Franz 2004; Ellison et al. 2007).

Web 2.0 furthermore creates an infrastructure of latent ties (ones that exist technically but have not yet been activated) and provides an opportunity for weak ties to develop and strengthen (Haythornthwaite 2002: 385). It lays the groundwork for formerly unacquainted individuals to connect. Through the open structure offered by social media, users can selectively create communities based on interest rather than prior acquaintance (Haythornthwaite 2005: 140). Latent ties are activated, i.e. converted from latent to weak ties, by some form of social interaction between users.

In addition to these resources accessed via personal contacts, social media are in some cases open to everyone, thereby creating a public sphere in which information can be published. This information has the advantage that it does not originate from any authorities and that it circulates through low-key channels. Also, it spreads very rapidly and offers the latest news (Held et al. 1999). Social media thus constitute a 'backstage' space of realistic information (Goffman 1959). This backstage structure of information can be conceived of as a form of resistance to dominant structures, such as the increasingly restrictive immigration regimes of advanced societies (Scott 1990; Broeders and Engbersen 2007). In the case of migrant networks, for example, information on upcoming rounds of legalization, availability of informal jobs and accommodation, or illegal ways of crossing borders can spread very quickly, thus affecting migrants' migration strategies. Social media can therefore be expected not only to strengthen people's ability to migrate, but also to feed their aspiration to migrate.

Social media can also provide users with unrealistic or even false information, however. Social media may manipulate migrants by offering jobs or partners that turn out to not be there, or to be very different than expected. Finally, we should recognize that a digital divide still exists. There are substantial inequalities among (prospective) migrants in terms of their access to social media, and also in the quality of use of social media.

Having outlined the role of social media in the field of migration, we may hypothesize that social media fulfill some positive functions for individual migrants and migrant networks. Social media may strengthen the bonding and bridging capital of migrants, as well as their information position. This may lower the threshold to migrate and it may strengthen a migrant's ability to cope successfully with the adversities of migration. Social media can also have some limitations, especially for those who have limited access to the internet or for those who are misled by false information. We may furthermore hypothesize that the functions of social media lead to a rethinking of the literature on international migration and social networks. Potential migrants may become less dependent on strong, traditional migrant networks for organizing the migration journey and for integrating in the destination country.

3 Data and methods

This paper is based on 90 in-depth interviews with migrants, conducted under the auspices of the THEMIS project. Theorizing the Evolution of European Migration Systems (THEMIS) is a comparative research project that aims to address gaps in contemporary theory on migration processes. It asks under what conditions initial moves by pioneer migrants result in the establishment of migration systems, and when this does not occur. Although THEMIS looks into diverse factors that might play a role in migration strategies, this paper focuses on the role of social media.

We interviewed Brazilian, Ukrainian and Moroccan migrants in the Dutch cities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam. We conducted 90 interviews, 30 for each migrant group. We found our respondents through immigrant organizations, churches, and our own networks. We used snowball sampling to reach more respondents and to penetrate further into the

migrant communities. We also used purposive sampling to find people with different background characteristics who might have different stories to tell. The sample includes migrants with different migration motives, educational levels and legal statuses. This resulted in a wide range of stories and opinions. We accordingly believe that our research may have broader implications.

The interviews were conducted by research assistants with interview experience between January 2011 and June 2011. Each interview lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours and they were held at people's homes or in cafés. The interviews were conducted in the language preferred by the respondent and were translated into English and transcribed ad verbatim.

In the empirical part of this paper we particularly draw on the section of the interviews concerning the information the respondents had about their destination, and the information channels through which this information was obtained. Besides questions about personal migration networks, the interviewers specifically asked about impersonal resources that the migrants used to migrate to the Netherlands. Other sections of the semi-structured interview template dealt with means of communicating with family and friends in other parts of the world.

We coded and analysed the material using NVivo software. In analysing the data, we used several 'definitive' and 'sensitizing' concepts (Blumer 1969: 148), providing us with some direction as to where to look and what to look for. In a first round of coding we developed the following relevant categories:

Destination choice - Information source: This code refers to where or from whom the respondent obtained information about the destination.

Transnational information - Communication channels: Concerning ways in which information about migration is sent: directly by letter, phone or email, or disseminated more widely via social network sites, TV soap operas, newspapers, migrant media, migrant forums, etc.

Transnational ties - Communication: Information on the respondent's and his/her household's general communication with people in their country of origin, including how this has changed over time. For example, they used to send letters but now use Skype.

Organizations in country of residence - Media, internet, etc.: This code refers to media/internet in the country of residence serving migrants from a specific country of origin, such as newspapers, websites, radio stations. This includes media specifically aimed at migrants from a specific country of origin (such as a Ukrainian newspaper) and media used by migrants from a specific country of origin (such as a Facebook group consisting of Brazilians in the Netherlands).

We additionally queried the data using specific terms: computer/pc; Internet; social media/Facebook/Orkut/VKontakte/Odnoklassniki¹; weblog/blog; forum; VoIP/Skype and email.

Based on the interview excerpts we collected, we conducted subsequent rounds of coding to answer our research questions. We followed an 'adaptive theory approach', which implies a constant dialogue between theory and empirical data (Layder 1998). Through several rounds of coding, we confronted the data with our preliminary theoretical concepts on the functions of social media and the role of social networks, and collaboratively formed the new theoretical insights that emerged from the data. In the following, we present the results of our analysis.

4 Effects of social media on migrant networks

Our data reveal four relevant functions of social media in migrant networks. The first three deal with the activation and reactivation of social capital in migrant networks. The fourth concerns the information infrastructure created by social media, which offers opportunities to exchange 'streetwise' knowledge on migration. These four functions of social media are effective in different stages of the migratory process (cf. Hiller and Franz 2004). Some respondents report that they consulted social media for assistance or information concerning migration while still living in their country of origin. Others describe how social media facilitated their life in the destination context just after immigrating and during the process of settling in the country of destination. Social media as a means of maintaining strong ties is relevant for migrants and non-migrants for many years after migrating. In the following, we will outline these four functions.

First of all, we observe that online media play a crucial role in maintaining ties and contacts within geographically dispersed networks of family and friends. Thanks to their synchronous and media-rich nature, online forms of traditional one-to-one communication and social media enable a virtual co-presence. This creates a feeling of intimacy and proximity when communicating with others living thousands of miles away.

I still have many friends in Ukraine. And regardless of the distance we can still communicate. Skype is amazing. Once there was the birthday of my mate. They were at my friend's apartment drinking beer. So they called me on Skype, put the laptop in the middle of the room and I was drinking beer with them. This technology allows me to spend time with them while I am a couple of thousands of kilometres away. So the contact is still very close. (Viktor, 21, came from Ukraine to the Netherlands in 2009 as a student)

Some respondents even indicate that they maintain closer bonds with those from whom they are geographically separated than with some friends who are nearby:

My life is very good here, but what I see is that much of my social life is still in Brazil. Nowadays, 90 per cent of my contacts are on the internet, in emails or on

¹ As will be explained in the results paragraph, social media use varies according to cultural preferences. VKontakte and Odnoklassniki are social network sites that are popular in Ukraine and Orkut in Brazil.

Facebook are in Brazil. So in this sense I realize much of my life is still there. [...] I have friends here, of course, but it is a different friendship, a more distant relationship, in Brazil I have closer friendships, people whom I talk with more frequently, via Skype, Facebook or email. In short, my friendships from Brazil are closer to me than the ones from the Netherlands, besides my family, of course. (Beatriz, 45, migrated from Brazil to the Netherlands in 2002 to live with her Dutch partner)

The affordances of these online media lower the threshold for individual migrants to undertake the step of migration:

If I were to migrate 20 years ago without having this technology, phones and internet, it would probably be far more difficult for me since my bonds with my friends are very close. I have very close friends over there whom I have known since I was three or four years old. So it would be difficult for me. I would probably miss them a lot. But now it is quite easy. I still miss them of course – I cannot be close to them and go somewhere together – but still we are able to communicate and that is great. (Viktor, 21, came from Ukraine to the Netherlands in 2009 as a student)

Our respondents confirm that new communication technologies have altered the relationships they maintain with friends and relatives from whom they are geographically separated. The change in medium has also changed the message (McLuhan and Fiore 1967). One of the affordances of social media in migrant networks is simultaneity: messages can be received immediately after their sending. This makes the communication much more instant than for example through letters or audio tapes. The content is also more media-rich: besides written and spoken communication – as in the case of letters and telephone – communication is often visual as well, for instance when video chatting or sending pictures. These affordances do not entirely do away with the limitations of geographical separation, but long-distance communication has become much more intimate and tangible (see for a comparable conclusion: Madianou and Miller 2012). Social media can thereby make strong ties in the home country an intimate part of daily life in the destination country (Brekke 2008; Miller 2011). The emotional and social costs of migration are accordingly mitigated (Komito 2011), which in turn might lower the threshold for migration.

Second, social media offer the possibility to revive contact with important weak ties, thereby acquiring bridging social capital. This affordance is inherent to social media, in contrast to traditional one-to-one communication media. As Wellman (1999; 2001) asserts, computerized media are particularly suited to supporting weak ties among loosely bounded, sparsely knit and far-flung networks. For migrants, information on new destinations is more likely to spread through relatively weak connections than through close contacts (King and Wood 2001; Hiller and Franz 2004). Weak ties in destination contexts may function as ‘pioneers’, providing information or assistance to new migrants – for instance to find housing or employment. In some cases these weak ties evolve to become strong ties:

I know a lot of young men who use the internet to come to Europe. Sometimes they sit in internet cafés all day long. They use MSN a lot. I never saw them using

anything else but time has changed. I think they are also using Facebook and other sites now. There are even popular Arabic songs about this. One song is named 'Josephine'. It's about a young man who meets an older lady on the internet and starts dating her online, after a while she comes to Morocco on vacation and they eventually marry. I saw this happen when I still was living in Morocco. A friend of mine met a lady on the internet and she came to see him after 3 months of internet dating. They are still married after 10 years and even have children. So yes, many people are using the internet but I don't know how many succeed. (Hamza, 33, came from Morocco to the Netherlands in 2001 as an irregular migrant)

Some of our respondents describe how they were themselves contacted by far-removed acquaintances or total strangers in their countries of origin, asking for information about migration to and life in the destination context.

Two guys added me on Orkut and they asked me about the Netherlands. They wanted information. [...] I also heard this once from a friend of mine. He was also added by strange people. Some people meet up here through online connections. You see that someone else also lives here so you get in touch with him and arrange a meeting. [...] It is an easy thing to do. Everyone can connect. You can see where people live and connect to the people that live in, say, the Netherlands. (Douglas, 23, migrated from Brazil to the Netherlands in 2003 with his family members)

I receive emails, because I have worked for this magazine. I have a message from a lady who just got married with a Dutchman and she is asking me about legal documents. I try to answer with what I know. (Gustavo, 46, migrated from Brazil to the Netherlands in 1986 to study)

Third, social media have the potential to go beyond already established weak ties and to activate new ties, latently available through the structure of the internet as a social medium (Haythornthwaite 2002). Some newly arrived migrants from Ukraine and Brazil got in touch with unknown migrants who had already settled in the Netherlands. Via them they obtained information about settlement in their place of destination.

When I first arrived in the Netherlands, I also went looking on the internet. There are some sites from people who migrated here. People have a lot of questions and pose them there. I tried to figure out some things that were new to me here in the Netherlands so at first I went to those sites a lot. [...] There is a Dutch website made by a Russian lady who has lived in the Netherlands for a long time. Many people visit this site. But also Hyves [Dutch social network site similar to Facebook]. There are many groups of people who migrated to the Netherlands so you can sign up for them. (Yevgenia, 30, moved from Ukraine to the Netherlands in 2005 after meeting and marrying a Dutch partner)

At a certain point I needed to start looking for a job, since I was running out of money. I was still in The Hague, and I didn't have any contact with other Brazilians. So I came to Amsterdam and started to get in touch with Brazilians.

[...] Interviewer: How did you do this, how did you find them? I started through Orkut. There it says; Brazil – Holland. So then I started sending others an invitation through Orkut and meeting with people, one day with one, then with another. (Lucas, 34, migrated from Brazil to the Netherlands in 2009 as an irregular labour migrant)

Our respondents said that in some cases they were happy to help. Altruistic and instrumental motivations (Portes 1995) played a role. If assistance is based on altruistic motivations, weak ties sometimes develop into strong ties. In other cases our respondents did not respond to requests or they rejected them, advising the person not to migrate. As Böcker (1994) terms it, they acted as ‘gatekeepers’.

Lastly, the internet as a social medium functions as an open information source. It is generally claimed to lead to a democratization of knowledge. It not only makes information publicly available, but also offers access to information through non-institutional, discrete sources. ‘Backstage’ knowledge is available in addition to information from official sources. Some of our respondents describe how they consulted internet sources as part of the migration process.

When I came to the Netherlands, I gathered a lot of information. I went to a cyber café, I printed a lot of pages about the Netherlands, about the life of Brazilians over here et cetera, the temperature, what they eat, what they don’t eat, how expensive things are. (Juan, 36, migrated from Brazil to the Netherlands in 2005 to live with his Dutch partner)

There [Orkut group - Brasileiros na Holanda] you find an exchange of information on your rights, the consulate, the language. Everything. Schools. (Miguel, 36, migrated from Brazil to the Netherlands in 2009 to work)

Especially for (prospective) irregular migrants, this information is immensely valuable. They cannot go to regular consultative structures for immigrants to request information or assistance in finding a job or a home, because of their legal status. Social media form an underground communication structure in the domain of illegality, where information can be shared.

I know there is an online group Brasileiros na Holanda. Sometimes people ask there where they can stay or where they can go. They are discreet in a way. Interviewer: How? Well, they do not ask whether I am legal for example. (Letícia, 46, migrated from Brazil to the Netherlands in 1989 as a dancer)

We looked up certain farms looking for seasonal workers on the internet, and went there to check it out. I found a job pretty quickly – a few farms rejected me because I did not have a work permit, but one agreed to hire me for a few months. (Ivan, 28, came from Ukraine to the Netherlands in 2008 as an irregular labour migrant)

From an information-sending perspective, some respondents told us how they openly provide information to others in their country of origin. As with people who respond to social media requests, this can have both instrumental and altruistic motivations.

Yes, I always use Orkut to share information [...] I heard for example about a site where you can see the amount of pension you will get. I shared that information with everybody. I always do that when I find something interesting. (Gustavo, 46, moved from Brazil to the Netherlands in 1986 to study)

In sum, social media have established an infrastructure consisting of strong, weak and latent ties, and are a source of strategic information. This social media infrastructure has changed the nature of migrant networks and has lowered the threshold for aspiring migrants in various ways. Social media provide access to assistance or information that was not available in pre-existing social networks. We observe that social media facilitated access to bridging capital either before or after migration. This concerns information on, for example, the labour market, legal conditions, or other practical issues concerning migration to or life in the destination context. As Faist (2000: 4) argues, this kind of information plays an important role in migration decision-making. Based on this information, potential migrants can weigh the costs and benefits of migration.

5 Limitations to social media's facilitation of migration

We also need to take note of some limitations to these functions of social media for migrant networks. First, there is a digital divide, meaning that everyone has equal access to social media resources. In the literature, attention given to the digital divide initially focused on inequality of internet access (Norris 2001). More recently there is an increasing awareness of inequalities in internet use among people with internet access; for example with respect to the ease, effectiveness and quality of internet use (DiMaggio et al. 2004: 356). In both scenarios, socio-economic status, level of education, urban/rural residence and age can cause significant differences. Much has also been written about a global digital divide in terms of internet penetration and internet use between countries. This largely correlates with the countries' income per capita (Chinn and Fairly 2007). The Netherlands is among the countries with the highest internet penetration. Brazil, Ukraine and Morocco have average but rapidly increasing internet access. The percentage of individuals using the internet in the Netherlands was 90.72 per cent in 2010. For Brazil, Morocco and Ukraine this was, respectively, 40.65 per cent, 49 per cent and 45 per cent in 2010 (International Telecommunication Union 2012).

Indeed, the use of social media among our respondents differs for age, class, place of residence and gender. Migrants older than 60 or 70 years tend not to use online communication tools as much as the younger generations do. They did not grow up with it and have difficulties learning and keeping track of recent developments. Also lower-educated labour migrants tend to possess fewer internet skills. These groups instead rely on more traditional ways of communication.

In 2005 I didn't own a computer, and internet was something that only the rich people in Morocco had, so I didn't use that. The only knowledge I had about Holland was the information that people gave me: my friends and my family who actually lived in this country. And of course the knowledge that I had acquired in

college, about the Western world and their democratic systems. (Tarik, 33, came from Morocco to the Netherlands in 2005 as an irregular migrant)

I accidentally came across Facebook or something. I registered, but... You know, I can't even make photographs. Only here in the Netherlands I started to learn how to use the computer. All these keys and such. It goes slowly. So I am still very far from mastering it. People write something to me, and I can't even answer it. I need to register again but I am not in the mood. As one of my acquaintances said: you don't have to visit anyone any more to socialize. Everything goes through internet. You've seen how we did it. Why should we spend money calling on the phone? (Viktoriya, 41, came from Ukraine to the Netherlands in 2001 as an irregular migrant)

Some migrants started to improve their computer skills in their country of destination and now benefit by maintaining ties with their friends and relatives in the country of origin:

When I have time, I spend it talking with my friends on Odnoklassniki. I also use Vkontakte but not that often. When I came here I was completely computer illiterate and was not able to even browse the internet properly. Now I feel that I am able to use it better. (Vitali, 29, came from Ukraine to the Netherlands in 2006 as an irregular labour migrant)

Whereas many settled immigrants have internet access via personal computers, smart phones or tablet computers, people in the countries of origin often do not. They need to go to an internet café in town for that, and they are generally less skilled in using the computer.

I call my family almost every day and I Skype with my sister. Not with my parents because they don't know how to work with a computer. I call them two or three times a week. (Yevgenia, 30, migrated from Ukraine to the Netherlands in 2005 after she met her Dutch partner)

Some migrants told us that they bought computers for their relatives or friends who remained in their country of origin. They did this mainly to create an easy way to communicate using (video) chat and VoIP like Skype.

Five years ago I bought a computer for my sister who moved to the city. Now we can call them [relatives] via the internet, using Skype and previously via this other program. (Leysa, 37, migrated from Ukraine to the Netherlands in 1997 to live with her Dutch husband)

The question of a divide in social media use mostly pertains to the second-level digital divide: instead of distinguishing between internet 'haves' and have-nots', it distinguishes between people's ability to use these applications for their intended purposes (Hargittai 2008). This digital literacy concerns the equipment, autonomy, skill, support and scope of use among people who are already online. We also see cultural preferences in internet use. Regarding social network sites for instance, Dutch people mostly use Facebook, while in Brazil Orkut is popular and in Ukraine people tend to use vkontakte.ru for similar purposes. This might create parallel virtual networks that only rarely overlap.

The migrant networks accessed via social media do not necessarily represent social capital: what matters is the individual's ability to utilize the resources they offer (Portes 1995: 12). Social media can moreover pose a number of pitfalls. Resources offered through social media cannot always be trusted. For instance, they may paint an unrealistically rosy picture:

What I see a lot is that Brazilians put all their photos on Facebook or Orkut. So there is this image that life in the Netherlands is very pleasurable and nice. It spreads a wrong idea of what it is to be here. (Luiz, 41, came from Brazil to the Netherlands in 2001 to marry a Dutch partner)

There are also instances of outright deceit:

There are people that get totally misled. A friend of mine and I made a song about this called 'The song of the cyberdude'. It is about a guy that introduces himself on the social network sites as an engineer, and then in the song it becomes clear that actually he is nothing but a cleaner. It is a joke. [...] The guy comes to Brazil, gives a woman presents, shows her that he has money. When she gets to the Netherlands and starts to live with him, she sees that he has debts and as she is married to him, she basically has to carry his debt. (Felipe, 43, a Brazilian preacher who arrived in the Netherlands in 1996)

Brazilian women in the Netherlands back then had a website, different from the one of today Brasileiros na Holanda. It was Brasileiras que vivem na Holanda [Brazilian women living in the Netherlands]. It was a self-help website. Some of them wrote there: 'Ah, that Dutchman gave me 1000 euros today. That idiot doesn't know that I have a Brazilian man back home'. I visited this website several times and I commented that I was really outraged about how the Brazilian women would brag about this behaviour. If it was at least kept secret, ok. (Giovanna, 44 migrated from Brazil to the Netherlands in 2005 to be with her Dutch partner)

Given the information asymmetry that exists in migration networks, transnational labour and marriage markets are risky territory. Migrants who migrate for the purpose of marriage or work are to some extent taking a leap into the unknown. Promises might or might not be fulfilled, as information in migration networks can be based on ulterior motives. The infrastructure of social media may contribute to this asymmetrical power relation. In the case of social media networks, largely composed of weak and latent ties, motives to exchange information or assistance are less likely to be altruistic and more likely to be instrumental (Haythornthwaite 2005: 128; Portes 1995: 15; Granovetter 1973). Therefore, migrants who rely on social media resources are even more at risk of falling victim to some form of abuse and serving the personal interests of the information provider. Weak ties may be more information-rich, but strong ties are often more trustworthy.

6 Conclusions

Migration networks that have existed for several decades show an evolution in means of communication:

They [friends and relatives who migrated to the Netherlands in earlier years] travelled back to Morocco every year in the summer holidays. Sometimes they would send letters or audio tapes, later on we would have contact by telephone and now almost everything is possible via the internet. (Rabia, 36, came from Morocco to the Netherlands in 1997 after her husband had already migrated)

The internet has only recently transformed into a social medium offering individual users the opportunity to organize themselves and to contribute to the contents of their virtual networks. For migrants who are geographically dispersed and dependent on long-distance means of communication, such networks offer several affordances. In this study we outlined four functions of social media that facilitate international migration. First, our respondents describe how social media altered the ways in which migrants and non-migrants with strong ties stay in touch. Communication has become less expensive, more frequent and media rich. Migrants describe how this has made their life in separation from their family and friends easier. Some respondents indicate that the availability of social media accordingly lowers the threshold to migrate.

Second and third, social media constitute new ways to consolidate weak ties or even to activate latent ties that provide new information. This can include information on, for instance, the labour market, legal conditions, or other practical issues concerning migration to or life in the destination context. Social media enable migrants to build loosely bound networks from which they can gather resources (Wellman 1999).

Fourth, in some cases social media constitute open, low-key information sources. This offers several advantages over institutional information sources: aside from the official information, streetwise knowledge of migration is available through 'backstage' channels (Goffman 1959). This can be viewed as a democratization of knowledge for migrants and also as a form of silent resistance against restrictive immigration regimes (Scott 1990).

We also encountered some limitations to these functions which stem from 'digital divides' and the reduced trustworthiness of virtual ties. Internet penetration naturally tends to be lower in some sending regions, and we see differentiated use of social media among people who do have internet access. After all, to find and assess information using social media requires certain skills. Additionally, we found that underlying motivations to share information via social media vary and that social media ties are less trustworthy. False information and deception are more likely to occur, as the providers of information will generally have not only altruistic motives, but also instrumental ones (Portes 1995).

In sum, we argue that social media are not just new communication channels in migration networks, but that the virtual infrastructure of media-rich, synchronous and relatively open contacts is actively transforming the nature of these networks and thereby facilitating migration. Interpersonal ties in migrant networks are reducing the costs and risks of migration through the exchange of information, resources and assistance. Migration

network theory assumes that people go to go to places where they already have contacts. However, with the internet as a social medium, it is easier to revive or make new contacts, providing access to an extensive pool of informal information and thus widening the horizons for aspiring migrants.

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