

# **‘Virtual’ intimacies? Families communicating across transnational contexts**

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***Abstract** Many analyses of the uses of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) focus on factors such as gender, class and communication infrastructures in explaining how and whether people communicate across distance. In this article, I argue that such analyses fail to capture the full complexity of ICT use. I use the results of a large qualitative study of transnational families, conducted in Australia, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Iran, Singapore and New Zealand, to examine how and whether kin maintain contact across time and space. The research demonstrates that ICTs are more available for some people than for others. However, also and possibly more important in the decisions people make about using particular communication technologies are the social and cultural contexts of family life, which render some ICTs more desirable than others at specific points in time. Acknowledging this provides an important corrective to economic analyses of transnationalism, and contributes to theorizing and documenting the role of ICTs in the maintenance of transnational social networks.*

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When Arturo Escobar (1994) welcomed us to Cyberia, he was encouraging anthropologists to step outside a discipline that continued to be ordered by concerns with the differences between the modern and the savage. Instead, he asked us to use the new attention to cyberculture – specifically, information and communication technologies and biotechnologies – to rejuvenate what anthropology is really about: ‘the story of life as it has been lived and is being lived at this very moment’ (Escobar 1994: 223). The terms ‘cyberia’ and ‘cyberculture’ invoked the radical newness of the contexts that anthropologists might begin to explore as they charted the implications, consequences and contexts of the construction of these new technologies. In Escobar’s account, cyberculture is acknowledged as emerging out of the familiar sociocultural environment of modernity. However, Cyberia is also presented as an exotic new land, in which we might imagine a future of cyborgs, cyberspaces and cyberpunks, among other exciting innovations. In this exotic world, the virtual competes with and in many respects supplants the ‘real’ world even as it evades being restricted to that world. This prospect of a virtual environment allows Escobar to anticipate utopian visions of a future where ‘anthropological studies of cybercultures can help us to imagine contexts in which possibilities for relating to technoculture that do not exacerbate the power imbalances in society might emerge’ (Escobar 1994: 221).

In the discussion that follows, I question the radical newness of cyberculture as a context for social life. I acknowledge that the new technologies have, indeed, transformed the ways in which people communicate. However, I also point to the strong continuities in the purposes and experiences of communication that suggest a certain capacity for humans to render new technologies mundane in a short space of time. Rather than a brave new world in which ‘reality’ is transcended by a visionary future, my focus is upon the more ‘everyday’ interactions that occur between family members who communicate across distance and national borders. The families I discuss are not so concerned about negotiating human–machine hybrid states as they are about remembering birthdays and anniversaries. They are not particularly concerned about removing or even inverting international structures of power, but they are concerned about the micro-political dynamics of providing care to ageing parents or new mothers without causing offence. In effect, what I am presenting is a claim that the brave new world of Cyberia is not a significant part of the ‘story of life as it has been lived and is being lived at this very moment’ by transnational families. Rather, my research suggests that new information and communication technologies have been incorporated in interesting (rather than exciting) ways into the familiar, ongoing patterns of everyday social life.

### **Conceptualizing ICTs in ‘Cyberia’**

Escobar asked us to pay attention to what was new about information and communication technologies at a time when the future impact of ICTs appeared to be fundamentally transformative. The relative ubiquity today of one of the more prominent and widely known examples of ICT, the Internet, makes it difficult to remember that it was not such a widespread part of everyday life only 10 or 15 years ago. The growth in popularity and accessibility of this technology has been rapid, even startlingly so. In Australia, for example, the proportion of households with Internet access increased from 16 per cent in 1998 to 53 per cent in 2003 (ABS 2003). This scale of growth is also typical of other Western nations around the world, and increasingly in non-Western nations (OECD 2005).

History indicates that any rapid introduction and uptake of new technologies tends to be accompanied by urgent discussions about the positive and negative implications. Technologies that now seem relatively ordinary – such as the radio, television, magazines and telephone – have all been accompanied by a variety of utopian and dystopian visions of their potential impact. This has also been the case with the Internet, and numerous scholars have applied their imaginations to its possibilities (see Haddon 2004; Hughes and Hans 2001). In such discussions, there is widespread agreement that the Internet represents a moment of radical shift from the past, but the nature of this shift is subject to vigorous debate. From the utopian perspective, we have heard claims that the Internet is creating new opportunities for democracy, or for inverting established inequalities. Thanks to the resulting ‘death of distance’ (Cairncross 1997), utopian arguments suggest that old boundaries based on factors such as geographic place, class, sexuality and gender might be newly transcended.

Moreover, new forms of social relationships might emerge – including cyber-friendships, cyber-romances and cyber-communities. From the dystopians, on the other hand, we have heard of a future in which human social activity is no longer conducted in meaningful face-to-face communities. Instead, people become more isolated, the streets even emptier, and collective public sensibilities are eliminated as humans are transformed into the serialized dupes of global capital.

Perhaps inevitably, such grand visions rarely stand up to empirical scrutiny. The truth is, rather, somewhere in between. There is significant evidence that access to the Internet both continues old forms of inequality and contributes to the construction of new forms of inequality (for example, Gibson 2003; see also the Introduction to this issue). The 'digital divide' runs both between and through countries. In Australia, for instance, there is a direct correlation between income level and level of Internet access in households (ABS 2000). In spite of similar levels of reported interest in the Internet, in 2000, 69 per cent of Australian households with incomes of over \$AUS 100,000 per year had Internet access, compared with less than 10 per cent of households with incomes of less than \$AUS 25,000 a year. Furthermore, among the high-income households, 19 per cent who did not have access in the home had ready access elsewhere, resulting in nearly 90 per cent of high-income households having easy Internet access. Among the low-income households, only 2 per cent reported having access elsewhere. Yet, both the gender divide and the age divide – considered significant statistics of inequality in Internet access<sup>1</sup> – are in decline. In 1998, only 2 per cent of Australians over the age of 60 accessed the Internet; two years later that figure had increased to 9 per cent. In 1998, only 28 per cent of females in Australia compared with 35 per cent of males accessed the Internet. By 2000, 43 per cent of females and 50 per cent of males reported accessing the Internet. The gaps are closing, and within very short periods of time.

There is no doubt that a lack of infrastructure, resources and/or cultural capital mean that some people are less able to access new ICTs than others. However, it is worth questioning an underlying assumption in these discussions: that the Internet is intrinsically desirable, and that the mere fact of its existence makes it a resource that all people wish to have. In the worldwide scramble to enter a new information age, there are very few asking just whether access to the Internet is indeed important to all people, whether and why it might be more important to some people than to others, or whether it might actually create new problems for some of its users that discourage them from seeking more full and complete access.

A key problem with the assumption of the desirability of Internet access – and of all new ICTs – is that it fails to capture the complexity with which the Internet, like all consumer products, is rejected, adopted, extended or ignored by specific individuals and social groups. By starting from a position in which Internet access is privileged as a desirable goal, and those who have such access are deemed the most powerful or superior on both a local and global stage, a nuanced analysis of the Internet becomes impossible. An alternative starting point is to ask the following questions: when, under what circumstances, and why, do people decide to adopt the Internet as a communication technology? Under what conditions do they choose to

reject this ICT? Do some groups or individuals variously choose to adopt and reject specific ICTs? What benefits does access to the Internet present to those people who adopt it? What new disadvantages or problems emerge as a result of adopting Internet use? In what ways has Internet access transformed the lives of both those who do and those who do not use it?

I will begin to explore these questions from the perspective of transnational families who communicate across distance – some of them via the Internet, others not. In doing so, I consider myself part of a growing number of sociologists and anthropologists who use ethnographic case studies to question the ‘newness’ of ICTs such as the Internet and the role they play in social and cultural life (Anderson and Tracey 2001; Dimaggio et al. 2001). I also hope to contribute to filling some of the gaps in our knowledge about families and technology (Meszaros 2004). I agree with those scholars who claim that we should not *assume* that the Internet is either beneficial or detrimental to society. Rather, the questions of benefit or detriment are best examined through ethnographic exploration of specific examples and contexts (for example, Gibb 2002). Furthermore, I situate my discussion within those studies that assume that the Internet supplements, rather than replaces, existing ICTs such as letters and telephone calls.

### **The research context**

This discussion emerges from a large research project examining ‘transnational caregiving’, rather than an ethnography of cyberculture, cyberspace or Internet-use.<sup>2</sup> A pilot project conducted in the late 1990s established that migrants living in Australia care for their ageing parents who remain in the home country (Baldassar et al. 1999; Baldock et al. 2000). In the subsequent project, we aimed to examine the range of factors that affected the capacity and willingness of migrants to engage in the transnational care of their ageing parents. We hypothesized that factors such as migration paths, geographic distance, culturally specific ideals of aged care, nationally specific aged care service provision, language and citizenship would be significant variables in transnational care practices. Thus, we used the ‘country of birth’ of the migrant (corresponding with the ‘country of residence’ of their aged parents) to design a sample of adult children–aged parent dyads that encompassed these factors. The final sample included migrants and refugees living in Perth, Western Australia, and their parents resident in Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Singapore, New Zealand and Iran.<sup>3</sup>

We began in 2000/1 by conducting interviews in the homes of the migrants and refugees in Perth, usually speaking English, and seeking their permission to contact their parents. Between 2001 and 2003, the interviewers then travelled to interview the parents in their own homes and in their respective languages. The extended contact with these families, in addition to the observations we made about representations of family and migration in their homes, resulted in us labelling these as ‘ethnographic interviews’. During each interview and subsequent contact with participants, we asked about family histories of exchanging support using the categories of Finch and

Mason (1993), migration history, aged care needs and services, communication practices, and visits. The innovation of including both adult child and aged parent in our research project enabled us to develop a clearer picture of the complex ways in which family relationships are negotiated and practised in transnational contexts.<sup>4</sup>

Several important findings from our research are worth mentioning here. First, family relationships are dynamic and fluid, shifting according to life-cycle events (including birth, death and migration) and perceptions of affection and emotional closeness. This makes it impossible to identify fixed patterns of communication or exchange that might be strictly quantified. Rather, as will become clear, our data indicate the variability of transnational communications over time and contexts. Second, family caregiving is rarely unidirectional. While we began by seeking how migrants cared for their ageing parents, we quickly discovered that ageing parents often provided more support than they received from their migrant children living overseas. The one clear exception was the refugees, who were more able to provide support than were their parents; however, even in this case some support did flow both ways. Third, even *within* family networks – and sometimes in the life history of one person – there was often variation in perceptions of communications, caregiving exchanges, and migration histories, including how satisfied people were with the past and present situations. The decision to interview both adult child and ageing parent was important in giving us a sense of these differences as the result of continuous negotiation (see also Finch and Mason 1993).

Finally, the inter-sample variation, while significant in some respects (especially in terms of structural factors such as aged care services and expectations), is nevertheless complicated by strong inter-sample similarities (for example in terms of common patterns of ICT-use) and intra-sample variations (for example in terms of age, gender and class).<sup>5</sup> Thus, in the discussion that follows I only identify the specific country of birth of participants when it becomes directly relevant. For the purposes of this discussion, the most significant distinction is between the 'migrant' and 'refugee' categories, rather than the national categories. However, even this distinction is sometimes problematic. Rather than a discussion of what 'the Irish' think and do as opposed to 'the Italians', or whether 'the telephone' is better than 'the Internet', what follows is instead a broad outline of the diverse ways in which people report responding to and negotiating new ICTs within the broader context of transnational family relationships. While most of the refugees had arrived in Australia in the 1990s, the migrants had come between 1960 and 1998, and thus presented a broad range of stories of their experiences of the capacities and practices of transnational communication.

### **Communicating in transnational domains**

All the participants in our research reported that they communicated with family members overseas. This is not surprising, given that our methodology sought participants who were willing and able to connect us to their parents in the home country. Interviewees talked of using a wide variety of methods in the past and

present, including (but not limited to) telephone calls, telegrams, letters, faxes, email, Internet chat rooms, Internet websites, mobile text messages, videos, tapes, gifts, cards and postcards. Some forms were more commonly used than others. Thus, while telephone calls and letters were mentioned by all interviewees, mobile phones and audio tapes were mentioned by only a few people. There was significant diversity in terms of how often people communicated, how satisfied they were with their communications, and how long or detailed each communication tended to be. Interestingly, rather than reflecting inter-sample differences, the strongest patterns regarding frequency, satisfaction and length of communication were those connected to the particular ICT being used. There were distinct patterns in our interview data of a historical progression in the typical mode of communication.

Up until the early or mid 1990s, all our interviewees preferred to rely on letters to communicate on a regular basis. This preference was usually framed in terms of the relative ease and convenience of the letter as opposed to the telephone as a means of communicating. Prior to the 1990s, the telephone was less widespread and considered less reliable and more expensive than letters. For example, one migrant described her efforts to call her mother in the early 1980s in the following way:

at that stage my mother didn't have a phone in the house, so I'd ring the next door neighbour and they'd run over and get somebody and they'd come back ... the neighbour was my aunt and uncle, so it was like you'd get one of the cousins or your aunt or uncle, so you could have a bit of a chat with whoever answered the phone, and you know, there was eight of them as well, so someone would hop over the wall and get somebody from our family.

While she enjoyed the brief chats with the extended family, she also remembered that it resulted in an even briefer talk with her mother because of the high per-minute costs of the telephone. As a new migrant in Australia, trying to establish her own household, such expenses were difficult to justify. Instead, letters were relied on for routine and regular communication. A typical rate of exchange was once a fortnight. Generally, people described their practice of writing a letter almost as soon as they received one. As the letters usually took a week or more to arrive, a fortnightly letter was the swiftest form of exchange. For most, letters were instead exchanged at monthly or even longer intervals. As one woman exclaimed 'they were always fabulous letters, but I mean you could be waiting six months for one'.

By the mid 1990s, the pattern of communication changed significantly. All the migrant families reported that at about this time the cost of international calls dropped significantly. The service was perceived as much more reliable, and by then the entire family network had home telephones. A new typical routine of communication emerged in which a weekly telephone call – usually on a Sunday evening – was made by the migrant to their parents. These calls were usually half an hour or longer in duration and, as one man described, they were 'about nothing in particular; just chat'. Some families reported even more regular telephone conversations, particularly the Singaporean families, which was the only group to share a common time zone with

Perth. For others, the time difference of up to eight hours prohibited a more spontaneous exchange of calls. At the other end of the spectrum, some families continued to exchange communications on a very infrequent basis – once every few months, or even a couple of times a year just to acknowledge a special occasion.

It was in the late 1990s that yet another mode of communication emerged as typifying some families' exchanges – the use of the Internet and, in particular, email; as one woman said, 'Now it's email messages and phone calls, but very frequent calls and very frequent messages.' Those migrant families (approximately a third) who did adopt email reported that their frequency of communication increased significantly as a result. Short messages, again about 'nothing in particular', were exchanged several times a day; as one migrant said: 'They [my family] have access to email as well, that's been really good because we'd probably email each other three or four times a day. My emails are fairly long actually, because we have a lot to say [laughing]. We're a very talkative bunch. And the phone, we're always on the phone!' This latter comment points to an important pattern in the histories of transnational communications: as each new ICT was developed, it did not necessarily replace the one that was used previously. Rather, families seemed to add layers of communication and thus increase their overall frequency of communication as each new technology was introduced (see also Howard et al. 2001; Wellman et al. 2001). As one woman explained, in the 1990s she communicated with family overseas: 'first, by letters and phone. When the phone was very expensive, the phone call was only once every two weeks or so and so I would write letters, quite a lot, quite a bit.' When letters were used for routine communications, the telephone call was reserved for special occasions such as birthdays, Christmas or New Year. When telephone calls became routine, the letter was no longer used regularly but instead became a means of communicating particularly sensitive or complex information, such as a diagnosis of terminal illness. When email was introduced into the communication pattern, it would often stimulate even more telephone conversations. Whereas in the past a telephone call had to be prearranged by letter to ensure that everyone was at the phone at the appropriate moment, email allowed people to respond instantaneously to a question such as 'are you free for a chat?' Letters continued to play a role, sometimes being used to add depth and detail to the brief communications sent by email, or sometimes even sent as email attachments. Each new layer of technology was arguably being used to communicate more efficiently with existing modes, even as it offered an alternative (see also Gershuny 2003).

It is easy to get caught up in the apparent utopia of transnational communications from the late 1990s onwards. Indeed, the expansion appears to be continuing, in that we have subsequently heard from some research participants that additional technologies such as mobile phone text messages have also been added to the communication toolbox. Furthermore, many interviewees spoke with excitement about the 'miracle' of communication that has been made possible by affordable and accessible international calls and cheap, instantaneous emails. Have these ICTs fundamentally transformed transnational family life?

### **A brave new world, or business as usual?**

The introduction of the Internet did not completely displace communication by letters or telephone. However, it did contribute to some significant changes in how people communicated. The families in this study used the Internet in three ways. A couple of families created or monitored family websites, on which they posted news items and digital photographs that documented special events in the family. A few families participated in chat room discussions, in which family members located across the globe exchanged news and information. Both these forms of communication might be used to argue that the family has become to some extent 'virtual' or meets regularly in 'cyberspace'. Unfortunately, the very small quantity of examples prevents further detailed exploration of these themes, but it is certainly an area for future research. Rather, the most common form of Internet use among the participants in our research was the use of email messages.

Most of the email communications were conducted between individuals and were short and frequent. In the few cases when people described sending messages to multiple recipients, they took more time to create a longer message with detailed information and updates. These emails were described as 'long letters' or as 'newsletters', and were seen as quite distinct from the majority of exchanges, which were 'spontaneous' and 'fun' and involved no particular emphasis on grammar or spelling.<sup>6</sup> In their descriptions of the impact of email on family life, interviewees often described how it made them feel more closely connected with their kin overseas. This fits with recent studies of mobile and domestic telephone use by people who are physically proximate. In an era of increased mobility, and greater periods of time spent apart, some studies suggest that people are using mobile and home telephones to create a form of virtual connectedness that might substitute for physical co-presence (Laurier 2001; Licoppe 2004). Licoppe (2004: 136–5) argues that: 'communication technologies, instead of being used (however unsuccessfully) to compensate for the absence of our close ones, are exploited to provide a continuous pattern of mediated interactions that combine into "connected relationships", in which the boundaries between absence and presence eventually get blurred.'

The use of ICTs is important for some transnational families in constructing or imagining a 'connected relationship', and enabling them to overlook their physical separation by time and space – even if only temporarily. To this extent, the *fact* of communicating may be seen as just as important as its content (Licoppe and Smoreda 2005). Indeed, this fits with the description most people gave of their email communications, which were often comprised of meaningless jokes, small comments on sporting events, or a statement about the weather. More significant than what is said in these exchanges is the moment of exchange itself, which reinforces a sense of the relationship between sender and receiver, 'filling in absence by a sort of incantation' (Licoppe and Smoreda 2005: 331). As a result of the instantaneity of email communication, and possibly as a function of its frequently prosaic content, migrants in particular felt much more closely connected to their kin in the home country. As one migrant said:



when I came here first, it was that thing, you know, you'd get a letter and the news was sort of old, and then you'd respond to it, so it could have been a month. Whereas now [with email and telephone calls] I feel like I'm more involved in what's happening there. It sort of gives me more of a feeling of being part of it, because sometimes you get news before other people, you know, people who are there!

A parent had a similarly appreciative perception of the role of email and telephone in enabling her to sustain a close and intimate relationship with her son in Australia, saying: 'I can tell you for example where my son is right now. His whole life. Whatever he does. I am not a possessive and obsessive mother, otherwise I wouldn't have enjoyed being in Australia [visiting him], but since we have this uninterrupted relationship of affection, we each look after the other.' Regardless of whether people actually *did* know what their kin were doing at a distance, the exchange of frequent, informal and spontaneous emails was important in giving them the impression of such knowledge. They aided in generating a strong sense of shared space and time that overlooked – even if only temporarily – the realities of geographic distance and time zones.

The apparent elimination of time constraints is particularly important in creating this impression. One of the commonly cited problems with telephone communication was the difference in time zones, for then only certain times of the day were appropriate for contacting family overseas. Email overcame this problem by enabling communications to be sent at any time, with the recipient able to respond at his or her own convenience. The peculiar relationship between emails and time might also explain why email emerged as particularly important for sending the details of the birth of a new child. In several instances, the new family member was photographed almost immediately after birth and the digital pictures were then sent by email to family members waiting overseas. This could be done in the excitement of the moment, regardless of the time of day, and the different time zones created some amusing temporal contradictions; as one migrant said, 'we saw the baby in its mother's arms before it was even born.'

Many described the sense of shared space and time enabled by the layering of ICTs as a miracle. Nevertheless, it also clearly provoked new problems in some family networks. Mediated intimacy at a distance often *feels* very tangible, so people describe not being constrained by the limitations of geographic distance or time. However, it is clearly an imagined construct in that kin continue to be physically separated. In some cases, this disjuncture between imagined proximity and physical separation results in new opportunities for conflict. For example, one migrant talked of how her sense of being 'part of the family' thanks to frequent emails resulted in her giving advice to her sister on a very sensitive issue. Her sister responded negatively to what she perceived as poor advice and subsequently refused to communicate – by email, telephone or letter. As a result, the imagined connection was replaced by a very real sense of the geographic distance separating the sisters. Unable to embrace her sister, or physically confront her and ask her to deal with the conflict directly, this

woman instead had to rely on extensive conversations with other kin in the home country to try and repair the damage.

Imagined proximity was also destroyed quickly and sometimes painfully for those migrants whose parents became disabled in some way that prevented them from using the full range of communication modes (see also Baldassar et al. 2006). For example, one man told of how he had exchanged letters and telephone calls with his mother for years until she began to show symptoms of dementia. At that point, he perceived telephone calls and even letters as pointless. Telephone calls were repetitive and unsatisfying and letters went unacknowledged. More importantly, his mother was no longer able to operate as the central node of his connection to other kin in the home country and so his sisters were unaware of his kinwork. Rather than persist with this unhappy situation, he began directing his communication instead to one of his sisters, who had taken primary responsibility for caring for their mother. In addition to regular telephone calls, they began to use email to communicate on an even more regular basis about his mother's progress and needs. The distance that emerged between him and his mother was so great, that he talked of his mother having already gone. In contrast, he and his sister described being able to continue a very rich relationship that overlooked the limitations of distance. Interestingly, this brother and sister had also had a very close sibling relationship prior to his migration, pointing to a significant point of continuity with the past. Rather than creating a new communication network, email in this case served to restore a relationship that had been temporarily interrupted.

New layers of ICTs do contribute to a stronger capacity to construct 'connected presence'. However, it is worth commenting on the continuities that such 'connected presence' tended to serve. As interviewees discussed their family histories of relationship, it became clear that each new ICT was incorporated into already existing expectations and practices of communication in very familiar ways. For example, sibling relationships that were strained prior to the availability of ICTs continued to be strained afterwards. Similarly, parent-child relationships that were described as intimate prior to email remained intimate after email was introduced. Also, the realities of the body and physical separation regularly reminded families that they were, in fact, living far apart.

### **Moments of relative (in)equality and (un)desirability**

Loss of abilities such as sight, hearing or the competence to use a keyboard can significantly impair the capacity to construct connection through ICTs. Although 'connected presence' gives the appearance of the annihilation of distance, it can also result in increased guilt and anxiety when the distance becomes evident again through tragedy. The very real limitations of distance are also clear when someone becomes ill and requires personal care. In some circumstances, a telephone call or email is simply not sufficient to show care for kin in need. In some respects, the connections enabled by email and other ICTs are 'sunny day' technologies. They provide few opportunities for engaging in the personal care that is sometimes required by ageing

parents, or for negotiating the conflicts and crises that can erupt as a result of continued interactions.

However, email also has a number of transformative effects that might be seen as very positive – even to the point of reducing inequalities. For example, it appears to encourage a wider range of kin to become involved in transnational family communication. Michaela di Leonardo (1987) established that kinwork – the work of maintaining family relations – is generally the work of women in households. In our research, too, telephone calls and letters remained predominantly the domain of women in transnational families. However, email appeared to complicate this pattern, so that communication became more diffuse. Rather than mothers and daughters forming the dominant nodes of communication, emails were sent between siblings and cousins and across other extended kin relationships, such as nephews and aunts. Moreover, email was often used to expand the communication network to include friends living overseas, not only by migrants but also by several parents who had made new friends in Australia while visiting their children. In some cases, the availability of ICTs enabled members of the family to activate relationships that might otherwise remain only a potential. For example, several families reported that a daughter-in-law took responsibility for communicating with her husband's parents overseas, thereby developing the relationship beyond what might be possible from an occasional visit.

Conversely, in other cases the availability of ICTs placed pressure on migrants to communicate with family members they would prefer to avoid. This is clear even in the case of the refugees, who had the lowest level of accessibility to ICTs. Contact with family in Iran was limited and the lack of contact caused a great deal of anxiety. But in some cases the availability of contact created its own anxieties – particularly when kin used ICTs to demand remittances from the refugees in Australia (see also Riak Akuei 2005). Furthermore, contact with kin settled in countries such as Canada and Sweden was relatively available, placing additional pressure on families in Australia. For example, some of the women in Perth reported that their husbands' families would call from Western countries and request financial and other forms of support, perceived as traditionally their right to request from this kin category. One woman threatened to leave her husband if he continued to respond positively to these requests, saying that they did not have enough money to provide for their own children or their family in Iran, let alone money to send to extended kin living in relative safety elsewhere. There was some concern that the greater level of contact with some kin rather than others resulted in scarce resources being distributed in ways that not everyone considered appropriate. Indeed, for the refugee families, the kin who required the most support were often the kin who did not have ready access to the means to communicate that requirement.

Distances, and the capacity to overcome them, are thus perceived differently by different social actors at different moments in time, depending on where they are located and which social relationships they wish to emphasize or suppress. Many migrants actively embraced the new and improved means of overcoming the effects of distance that new ICTs enabled. However, some migrants regretted the ways in which new ICTs reduced their capacity to sustain a sense of distance. Some

interviewees migrated precisely because they found their home country socially or culturally stifling or their kin dominating and difficult. An increased capacity to connect with home enabled those feelings of suffocation and restriction to extend across time and space. Furthermore, the availability of ICTs means that when such migrants choose not to communicate with some kin they are even more likely to be identified as the 'bad daughter' or the 'bad son'.

It is also important to remember that not all families experienced the pattern of continuous expansion of communication frequency and capacity. Over half the migrant families did not adopt the Internet or email for communication purposes. Many parents, in particular, did not see the point in purchasing a computer and installing Internet access – as one mother explained, 'I don't use email, I'm old and not used to it.' Another said: 'I regret not being able to use [the Internet], because I don't know how, otherwise [our communication] would be much more frequently [*sic*]. ... [But] I don't feel like starting with computers.' Instead, some relied on their local children to perform the work of sending, receiving and printing out emails from their children in Australia, thereby placing a new burden of care labour on local kin. Others simply continued to communicate by letter and telephone.

Support from family and/or community services emerged as important in encouraging some elderly people to access the Internet while discouraging others. Only one of the Italian families in our study regularly used the Internet for communication between the migrant child and their ageing parent, although several used it for communication between extended family members, including cousin-to-cousin or sibling-to-sibling contact. Among the Irish families, on the other hand, a third used the Internet for direct migrant–parent communication, and many more for cross-sibling or other family communications. This difference might be explained by the slightly younger age of most of the Irish parents compared with the Italian parent sample.<sup>7</sup> However, community-based access to Internet facilities was also an important factor. One elderly Irish couple reported that the local library was very supportive and even called them by telephone to let them know when an email had arrived for them to collect. Local community-provided computer and Internet training courses for senior citizens also seemed to be more readily available to the Irish than to the Italian parents.

The above differences between Italian and Irish elderly are insignificant compared with the lack of access to ICTs refugee families experienced. Many of the factors contributing to their relative lack of access were also factors that contributed to the difficulties of their everyday lives. Many of the parents in Iran lived in very insecure circumstances and did not have telephones in their homes. Although their kin in Western Australia had telephones, they were often unemployed or underemployed and so lived on very low incomes compared with the other families in our study. At the same time, telephone calls were relatively expensive (\$1.35 a minute between Perth and Iran, compared with 21c a minute between Perth and Ireland in July 2005), and represented a larger proportion of the family's weekly income when compared with the other families in our study. These families never mentioned Internet access and email communication as either a possibility or a practice. Moreover, even letters

were considered difficult. There was a general mistrust of the official postal service, with some reporting that letters had gone missing in transit along with the enclosed cash and others reporting that letters often took several months to arrive.

Nevertheless, the desire to communicate is clear in that all the refugee families developed strategies to negotiate these barriers. Rather than being sent through official postal services, letters were passed on through networks of friends, family and acquaintances travelling to the region. When travelling to Iran and back, our researcher<sup>8</sup> had suitcases stuffed with messages and gifts for the families she was interviewing. Phonecards, too, were a significant part of strategies for maintaining contact while also maintaining a budget that allowed financial support to be sent to Iran. Phonecards are a useful means of budgeting calls and thereby avoiding large domestic telephone bills at the end of a billing period, perhaps accounting for their clear and significant market growth (especially in 'ethnic markets', see Vertovec 2004). As one woman said 'I call every fortnight, I get a phonocard – some of them are cheaper than others. I always have one in my pocket.' Another woman reported that she always used phonecards to call her mother because her husband was often angry at how much she spent on telephone calls. She said: 'Once I called without telling him. When he saw the telephone bill he noticed it immediately and wondered if he knew about it.' Phonecards have the advantage in these circumstances of not leaving a record of the duration, target or cost of specific calls.

## **Conclusion**

Although its extent and direction varies from individual to individual, the desire to communicate across distance was nevertheless common to all the families in our study. This is regardless of the structural factors that might impede or enhance their ability to fulfil this desire. To this extent, the families in our research are 'transnational families', who use ICTs to create, support and reproduce 'social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders' (Glick Schiller et al. 1992: ix). Moreover, this is a social process that engages both migrants and their kin who remain in the home country (see also Olwig 2002, 2003).

Our research suggests that, although all ICTs serve to maintain transnational relationships, different forms of communication have different consequences for the family relationships they sustain. This finding supports recent research that focuses more specifically on the types of communicative acts that different communication technologies enable. For example, letters and postcards have been identified as potential tools for creating particular imaginative worlds, in which both the sender and receiver engage in an idealization of the other and of their relationship (Milne 2003). Research on the telephone has documented the ways in which men and women differ in their styles of telephone conversation, and how different cultural groups have different relationships with and attitudes to telephone calls (for example, Lach e and Anderson 2001; Moyal 1992). There is also an increasing awareness that the Internet and, more specifically, email are used in different ways by different genders and different cultural groups (Boneva and Kraut 2002).

Our research reveals that the introduction of email as a specific ICT has transformed the transnational family. The primary advantage of email is that it provides a sense of transcending time and space, which contributes to a perception of intimate connectedness. Most families saw this capacity for connection as improving the overall quantity and quality of contact that occurred. This might help to explain why, in the same period that Internet access has been increasing in Australia, the 'snail mail' postal service, too, has been undergoing growth (ABS 2004). Whereas previously geographic distance was a significant barrier to taking part in the lives of those who live at a distance, ICTs enable shared social fields to be constructed across vast distances.

This is significant because communication is essential for reproducing the social field in which family members – and quite possibly other networks – feel sufficiently connected to enable them to call on other members of the network for support. It is also essential in order to feel a need to provide support. Thus, in Finch and Mason's (1993) terms, transnational communications using ICTs are part of the histories of relationship that inform the felt level of obligation to exchange support. To that extent, ICTs reduce the impact of distance and migration on the exchange of support and care at a distance, something that has previously been assumed rather than demonstrated (Gordon et al. 1981; but see Litwak and Kulis 1987). However, at the same time, the increased capacity for communication generates new expectations of communication and support. This is not always seen as a positive effect.

Many people in our study talked of the 'miracle' of cheap and easy communication by telephone, email and fax, which enabled them to take part in the lives of their kin overseas. However, the development of ICTs has not contributed to a radical shift in how family life is thought about or practised. For the families in our research, ICTs have not created a world in which the extended family network has become a 'virtual family', or family events are constructed solely in cyberspace. There is no new or radical separation between virtual and real life, and certainly no virtual family has come to supplant the family that is situated in geographic space (see also Wilson and Peterson 2002). Although cyberspace and virtual communications provide a useful addition to family practices, they do not displace them. We already know that ICTs do not create virtual ethnic identities where none existed before (Panagakos 2003); it is also true that ICTs do not create virtual families where none existed before. Indeed, the ICTs are used primarily to enable and supplement the continuation of existing family practices.

Furthermore, the introduction of ICTs does not completely eliminate the effects of distance. The transnational family members we spoke to were keenly aware of their physical location at a great distance from their kin overseas, especially in times of crisis. The introduction of ICTs did create more opportunities for keeping in touch with those kin, and for creating a stronger sense of a shared social field. It is undeniable that the contact became more frequent and the sense of connection to everyday lives at a distance was enhanced. But sometimes this regular communication served to intensify rather than diminish the sense of distance. The inability to have face-to-face contact is sometimes made even more poignant by the fact that long-

distance communication has made the relationship feel so much more intimately connected.

Seeking out a distinctively new 'Cyberia' is likely to lead us to overlook strong continuities with the past, which persist in spite of the ways in which ICTs have transformed social relations and cultural knowledge. In contrast, it is in the ethnography of 'life as it is lived' that we see the delicate balance of both utopian and dystopian tendencies in the impact of ICTs on people's everyday lives. On the one hand, we can see that the introduction of email into everyday lives has, indeed, enabled people to feel that they are 'connected to home' and family, in spite of space and distance. However, this also constructs its own rather dystopian dynamic: in cases of crisis, the continued existence of distance returns to haunt the family network. Moreover, those who wish to escape find that it is even harder to create social distance.

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## **Notes**

1. This is not just a concern for the Internet; gender and age are generally perceived as significant barriers to technology access more generally, with technology often strongly associated with a young adult male identity (Grint and Gill 1995; Kramarae 1988; Terry and Calvert 1997).
2. Indeed, there are some interesting discussions of whether such ethnographies are even possible; but see Miller and Slater (2000) and Ito (1996).
3. A full account of this study, its methods and sample is available in Baldassar et al. (forthcoming). We recruited 15+ families for the Irish, Dutch, Italian, Singaporean and Iran

- samples. A smaller number of ten families were recruited for the New Zealand sample, which was added to the project at a later date because of its unique features. Citizens of New Zealand, unlike all of the other sample group participants, do not require visas to migrate to Australia and have greater immediate access to social welfare. The 'Iran sample' was included as a refugee group whose parents were resident in Iran (a transit country); members of this sample group (parents and refugees) were born in Iraq and Afghanistan.
4. Although I am aware of the problems and debates surrounding the use of the term 'family', I use it here as shorthand reference to perceptions of relatedness and obligation. Thus, 'family' refers to people 'who are related through blood or marriage, and any others whom people treat [or perceive or define] as relatives; for example, people who have been adopted, or cohabitants' (Finch 1989: 3), or friends or neighbours perceived by participants as kin.
  5. A more complete discussion of the variously present and absent role of cultural and national difference, and intrasample and intersample variations is presented in Baldassar et al. (forthcoming).
  6. This was a source of regret for some – particularly multilingual – migrants, who lamented what they saw as the resulting systematic and inevitable loss of language skills over time.
  7. Although both the Irish and Italian parents were in the 'elderly' category, there was a higher proportion of 'old-elderly' among the Italian parents in our study than in the Irish sample.
  8. Zahra Kamalkhani, a multilingual anthropologist who specializes in attention to Afghan, Iranian and Iraqi refugees in Australia, conducted the relevant ethnographic interviews in Iran and Australia for this group. See also Kamalkhani (2004).

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