ICT and Migration: Mobility and Cohesion in the Digital Age

Working group II: ICT, Skills and the Economic Participation of Migrants

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Bridging the gap: Social networking through Orkut amongst Indian IT professionals

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Research questions

• Does social capital in terms of networking play a role for digital capital-linked migrants?

• Which significant role does it play for Indian IT professionals working in a sector which is characterised by mobility, flexibility and individualisation?

• Which role does networking play in the economic participation of Indian IT professionals with an onsite assignment?
Research questions

- to study the effects and ramifications of the networking site ‘orkut’ – the top social networking site in India – on the social environment of highly skilled Indians working in Belgium

- maintaining & establishing strong ties or instrumental reasons?

- other tracks of networking with an impact on economic participation?
Research methodology

- Interviewees were selected from one of the largest virtual communities of ‘Indians in Belgium’ on Orkut

- As a researcher, I registered myself on it to establish long-term, in-depth, multidimensional contacts

- 25 semi-structured interviews offline

- No distinction between the on- and offline identity

- Perspective from below
• Social networking and discussion site operated by Google

• Launched in 2004 and ranked 128th worldwide

• Most visited social networking site in India, more than 12 million visitors and most popular site in the world amongst Indians +/- 24% users come from India, +/- 20% from Brazil (comScore 2009)

• Facebook and LinkedIn: to keep in touch with international friends and professional circle
• Use of Orkut is twofold:
  
  – Maintaining and re-establishing strong ties (emotional/affective bonds)
  
  – Instrumental reasons: creating weak ties of interaction; to gain information of fellow countrymen
Case-studies

- Networking through job hopping
- Networking through the forum on Orkut
- Networking through the company to integrate abroad
Networking through job hopping

• ‘I do feel work secure even in times of recession because I and my former colleagues we have a large network now, thanks to shifting companies regularly.’

• ‘Sometimes I do get messages from unknown people via Orkut with the request to forward a CV or to tell more about professional life in Belgium. I have duly answered them. Also if I notice that one of my contacts in LinkedIn is looking for a new job, and I come across something, I do pass on the information or circulate the CV in my network. Twice people were able to score jobs via these networks, so it is useful.’
Networking through the forum on Orkut

• ‘I had already professional experience so the former colleague of my husband referred me and I must say, referral goes faster than if your profile is forwarded by a consulting company. Now I have referred another Indian person in my company who posted his profile in the community “Indians in Belgium” on Orkut. If I help someone, I might get help from someone if I need it. That is what I believe in. I feel we are in a different country; we should share our experiences and information. It might help.’

• ‘We only meet people in the office… so our Belgian colleagues are our only Belgian friends. But we can’t build a rapport with them because at the end of the day, we are professionals. They feel insecure as soon as they see us. They can’t build a personal relationship with us.’
Networking through the company

• ‘My company takes care of me. I have my own circle of Indian colleagues, I don’t need others.’

• Indian IT professional on Belgian pay-roll:
  ‘I want to learn the language and integrate. I am not here to socialise with other Indian countrymen. When I came, I was the only Indian in the company, so I had to make local friends. For me it’s different, if I go back to India, I don’t have a job! I have a good network here. On the long term, I can set up my own business or work as a freelancer. Many local friends are willing to help or join me. To build a network like that, I would have to spend quite a few years in India again.’
Conclusions

- Economic participation does not necessarily imply social and cultural integration.
- Opportunities of bridging social capital are limited: distinctive transnational networks are created through the use of different media.
- Social networking sites such as Orkut play multiple roles in the professional, social and personal realm.
- Virtual pathways of relationships add to keeping a notion of continuity in the lives of cross-boundary working nomads who are involved in borderless careers which imply disjuncture and displacements.
Thank you!

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